

T.E. ELLIOTT



Loved
BY THE
Beast

A HISTORICAL RETELLING
of Beauty & the Beast

Loved by the Beast
A Historical Retelling of Beauty and
the Beast

T.E. Elliott

The Beast's Legacy Book 1

Other Books in the Series:

Service and Slumber

A Gentle Pursuit

The book in your hands may be read independently of the next two, it is a complete story of its own. The following two are also complete stories, but should be read in sequence as they build on this one and reference characters and events from it

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To My

Creative

Hero, who has

Relentlessly pursued me and

Inspired this tale,

Serving and loving me,

Telling me I am his darling,

I do dedicate this book.



And to my ever faithful husband for going above and beyond to give me
time to write.

Prologue

I 'd heard the rumors about me from an early age. My mother tried to keep them from me, but I knew, I'd always known. I had nowhere to go but this château and its grounds, so as a naturally curious boy I found every hiding spot, every dark corner, and searched behind every tapestry. I'd heard every bit of gossip, every planned tête-à-tête from the servants without being discovered...mostly.

Audric chuckled to himself as he remembered being outed by an embarrassed housemaid or an angry cook. He sobered again as he dipped his quill in the ink pot and continued writing.

The rumors varied from naming me a beast to claims to have seen me lurking about at night with claws and fangs dripping with blood as I hunted my next victim. No one had ever seen me though, Mother made sure of that. Anyone caught on the grounds was punished to the full extent of the law. Our servants had been carefully selected and sworn to secrecy. When I was outside, it was in the special garden that Father had made for me. With its high hedges I was kept from any prying eyes that could have made it that far onto my family's property. That garden was my haven.

Perhaps that's why the study of plants has always fascinated me. Hippeastrum, Zantedeschia, Centaurea— they filled my life with beauty. But it was Rosa, the roses, that were my favorite. The danger of the thorns, the deep beauty of the petals, the fragrance that filled my senses, I was always drawn to them.

Audric closed his eyes and took a deep breath, almost smelling the scent as he thought about them, then released his breath and opened his eyes. He stared out the window, lost in thought.

Am I a beast? As a child I was delighted by those rumors. I played beast and went roving over the château, sneaking up on the servants with the loudest roar I could muster. It was great fun until the day I tried it on my parents. As soon as my mother recovered from the shock, she was so

angry she sent me to my room without supper. Father took me by the shoulders and told me sternly to never play beast again. "You are a man, Audric, a man." I had been in trouble before, but this was different. I couldn't understand why they were so upset.

Then I heard another rumor. Francine, our youngest housemaid, was discussing it with the housekeeper, Madame Villeneuve. "Can you believe it? They said the little Monsieur isn't even human, or that at most he's only half human. They tried to get me to tell them more about him, but don't worry, I held my tongue."

I had been hiding in a cupboard. I burst from the cupboard door, tears in my eyes, breathing heavily. I stared at them for half a moment then fumed out the door as I escaped to my room. Francine came after me, fear in her voice. She knocked at my door. "Please, Monsieur, I don't believe what they said." knock, knock. "Please don't tell your mama, Monsieur, she'll be so upset."

Madame Villeneuve came to find me next. I let her in, she always had the words that made me feel better when I was hurt or sick. She knelt down in front of me with a warm smile on her face. "Why are you sad little Monsieur?"

"I am a real person, aren't I, Madame?"

"Why don't we think about that for a minute, hm? Every living creature has a mama and a papa, right?"

I nodded my head.

"And have you ever seen a mama dog have kittens or a mama horse have a duck for a baby?"

I giggled and shook my head.

"Are your mama and papa people, little Monsieur?"

"Yes."

"So what does that make you?"

"But I don't look like mama or papa."

She took me to the mirror.

"Let's see, two arms, two legs, a head, ears," she wiggled my ears and made me laugh, "you have your papa's eyes and your mama's smile, I'd say that's pretty close. No one looks exactly like their parents."

I perked up. "I am a person!"

Madame hugged me from behind. “Don’t forget that truth, dear boy, no matter what you hear others say.”

I didn’t tell Mother what I’d heard, but after that all the servants went to the city for supplies rather than the village. No more rumors reached my ears. I suspect Madame Villeneuve had something to do with that.

Am I a beast? Read my story and decide for yourself.

Chapter 1

Monsieur Du Bois was once a wealthy merchant. His fleet of ships carried the finest silks, teas, furniture, and baubles from the China seas, that he then sold to the nobility. A profitable endeavor that gave him great prestige among his contemporaries. He lived in Paris with his three sons and three daughters: Pierre, Jacques, François, Juliette, Marie, and Léa.

As providence would have it, Monsieur Du Bois' success was not to last. Every single one of his ships were lost at sea. His wealth seemed to vanish overnight, and with it, all of his so-called friends, his sons' prospects, and his daughters' suitors. And so in the Year of our Lord Seventeen Hundred, there was nothing for it but to flee to the mountains where life was slow and the act of living less expensive. Monsieur Du Bois had a small cottage and plot of land in the French Alps, previously bought for his late wife who loved the mountain air.

Time will not be wasted in telling of Monsieur Du Bois' sons and two elder daughters as they adjusted to country living. Suffice it to say, they were less than pleased and found it insufferably difficult to give up the finer things of life. Léa, on the other hand, was much more like her mother than the others. In her wealth, she was unspoiled; in her beauty, she was not vain. Her father endeavored to love his children equally, and he did, but he couldn't help but have a special place in his heart for Léa. Now that his wealth was gone and everyone, even his own children, turned their backs on him, Léa was all the more a comfort to him.

So much so, that he would go to great lengths if he thought he could bring a smile to her face.



"I will get you, my little friend, mark my words," Du Bois' voice was hushed as he slowly drew nearer to his prey, a small rabbit. Du Bois contributed to the family income as a warrener, though by his own admission, not a very good one. He hunted rabbits for food as well as to

sell in the village marketplace. His sons, to their credit, did their best to manage the small farm that was part of their land. You see, the Du Bois family property included a parcel of farmland as well as a portion of the forest immediately adjacent to the much larger property of the prestigious Rousseau family. Château Rousseau was like a fortress, everyone knew to stay off of their land unless they wanted to be punished—everyone who grew up in the village, that is.

Du Bois' traps had failed again to catch anything, so the sight of the furry creature gave him some hope. Currently they were at a standoff. Du Bois crouched low to the ground, the rabbit watching, waiting to spring away at any moment. Then, an unfortunate step, a snapped twig, and a flash of fur set Du Bois running after said rabbit. He gave quite a chase, weaving through trees, pouncing on bushes, determined not to come home empty-handed. But in the end, this once wealthy merchant was not conditioned for such exertion. He stopped, huffing and puffing, doubled over trying to catch his breath. Looking up, he noticed two beady black eyes staring up at him, as if mocking him.

"Oh, how kind of you to wait for me! Who is hunting whom, may I ask?" Du Bois stood up and stretched his back, "Ah, you'll be the death of me yet, I'll wager." He laughed heartily at the thought. The bunny bounded away, wiggling beneath a nearby gate, bringing Du Bois' attention to the wall before him. The trees came to an abrupt end where the wall, about five feet high, stood and went on as far as the eye could see. On the other side of the wall was a curious sight—a tall, well manicured hedge that blocked his view of anything beyond. It was high, at least ten feet, and wide, from where he stood he couldn't see where it ended. He looked back the way he came. "Now where have I wandered off to?"

Uncertain how to proceed, he placed his hands on his hips and his eyes scanned the hedge. Curiosity got the best of him and he tried the gate that the rabbit had shimmied under. He jiggled it and a rusty lock fell among the ivy that clung to the gate. After more pulling and shoving, sure enough, the door opened. Du Bois began to follow along the wall of the hedge until he came to a corner and began to trace along that wall as well. As he neared the next corner, he saw a grand château in the distance. He'd visited grand estates such as this a time or two on matters of business.

But his attention was drawn back to the hedge, what on earth was hidden inside it? There was no going back now. If someone found him, he would simply explain that he was lost, no harm done. So, he continued to follow the third wall until he came to an arched doorway. A stone path lined with smaller flowering bushes led away from it toward the château. Stepping over the bushes, he faced the doorway. The arch was covered in pink climbing roses, and a sturdy wooden door stood beneath it. Du Bois reached for the handle, hesitated, then slowly pulled it open. It creaked as he did so. He peeked inside quickly, then checked back behind him once more, all was clear. Stepping inside, he carefully closed the door behind him. Du Bois stood in awe at the sight of a flourishing, proper French *jardin*. Paths wove around immaculate flower beds, budding fruit trees dotted here and there, marble benches, statues, and fountains decorated the scene.

In the center of the expansive garden there sat what appeared to be a small stone cottage. Du Bois walked toward it, taking everything in as he went. The cottage itself was surrounded by a variety of roses in several shades. There were two large windows on the side of the cottage that faced him, on either side of the door. He peeked inside and noticed windows in the two side walls as well. “They must enjoy the sunshine a great deal with all these windows,” Du Bois said to himself. “Glass too, first rate.” Under the right-hand window sat a chaise lounge, and by the left-hand window was a wingback chair situated so as to best see out the window on that side. In the corner by the chair was an elaborately carved desk. Du Bois admired this especially, “Fine craftsmanship, indeed.” Further inspection revealed a harpsichord elegantly painted on the underside of the cover, as well as a marble fireplace invitingly lit. Though it was spring, there were still a few cool days that would make a good blaze necessary.

A sudden thought struck him, “A fire, lit, the owners of this fine little cottage are likely to be close by. I’d better be on my way.” As he turned to leave, he noticed again the roses and thought how much his youngest daughter would enjoy having one to brighten their home. “They will surely not miss one flower,” he said as he picked up the shears that sat on a nearby bench. As he cut a blazing reddish-orange rose that reminded him of a sunrise, a firm hand gripped his shoulder. He lifted his head, the

rest of him still crouched down, into the stern face of what must be a gardener.

“You are trespassing, Monsieur,” there was no warmth in the gardener’s voice.

Du Bois straightened and turned toward him, “I...” His excuse of being lost died on his lips as it suddenly seemed quite clear that he had not lost his way into a private garden.

“Forgive me,” he said instead, “I was quite taken in by the beauty of your gardens. My daughter would take much pleasure in this one rose.” He smiled, hoping to ease the tension. The gardener did not return it.

“You will need to see Duchesse d'Aramitz,” he said gruffly, “Come with me.”

Du Bois began to get an uneasy feeling; he hoped that this Duchesse d'Aramitz would be more forgiving than her gardener.



Du Bois found himself in a small but lavishly furnished sitting room off the main entrance of the château. The gardener was staring him down with a frown that could curdle milk. Having called a servant to find the lady of the house, he now watched Du Bois like a hawk. Du Bois wondered whether the man thought he might bolt, either that or steal something.

In point of fact, one could stop Du Bois from being a merchant, but one could never take the merchant out of Du Bois. He took in each piece of furniture, each trinket that adorned the marble mantle piece, guessing how much each piece cost and its value. Having not heard the rumors of the occupants of this particular château, nor the warnings designed to keep people away from the place, he sat blissfully unaware. A good merchant never turned down the opportunity to make the acquaintance of the well endowed.

The servant from before opened the door with an anxious look on his face. He watched Du Bois uneasily. The grand lady herself entered the room in a flourish of importance and full skirts. Her demeanor gave every indication that she was not the sort of person that could be schmoozed by a charming former merchant.

“Do you know who I am?” she demanded.

“Duchesse d'Aramitz, I presume?” The merchant stood and took off his cap. He answered with uncertainty, and gave an uneasy glance at the gardener.

“You may go, Devereux,” she nodded to the butler, who closed the door as he left. The lady turned back to Du Bois. “How dare you presume to trespass on my property. Do you know I could have you arrested for that alone.” It was a statement not a question.

“I...I...certainly did not mean to trespass, Madame. I am a warrener and was hunting on my own land. I guess I took a wrong turn or two...”

“You were poaching then!”

“Madame, please, I had no malicious intent. We are neighbors, in fact.” He chuckled, but the disdain of the lady withered him.

“You were found in the garden and you stole a rose,” she said each word like an executioner announcing his sentence before death, and he was found guiltier by the moment. Was it just his imagination or did she seem to relish that she had so much against him?

“Did you not know that the garden is private, that the occupants of the house may frequent it? What were you after, sir? A glance, a peek, a tale to take back to the town?”

“I...don't know what you mean. I admit that I was curious about what was inside, it is true. I did take the rose, but I truly meant no harm. I thought one rose would not be missed among so many. It is for my daughter, my *Belle*. Are you a mother, Duchesse?”

While Du Bois meant this innocently in his ignorance, to Duchesse d'Aramitz it blazed the fire that was already simmering.

“Enough! I don't know if you are stupid or just a brazen fiend, but you will suffer the consequences! Lambert, take this man to the magistrate and have him charged with poaching, trespassing, and thieving.”

“Duchesse, wait!” Du Bois went to his knees as she turned to leave. “The punishment for such offenses is heavy. What will happen to my family? I was once a wealthy merchant, but am no longer. My sons, my three daughters, they need me.”

She turned haughtily and frowned down at him as he trembled, and seemed to be considering something. “Do you mean to tell me that you are

a *bourgeois*?”

He wasn't sure what his social standing had to do with anything at this moment, especially now that he was closer to the bottom class than the middle, and gave her a dumbfounded look.

Duchesse d'Aramitz turned her head in exasperation. “You were not born a peasant?” she hissed.

“Forgive me, Madame, no, I was not. In fact, at the height of my career I was named among the *haute bourgeoisie*,” he added proudly.

“Indeed? And you have daughters?”

“Yes, three.”

“Are any of them of age?”

“All, Madame.”

Du Bois did not dare to hope for mercy from this fierce woman, but something seemed to be shifting. Why was she hesitating now? Everything about this situation was confusing and horrifying at the same time.

“Go home, sir,” she finally told him in a much calmer voice, “go home and wait for me to decide your fate.”

Lambert, the gardener, who as it turned out was the head groundskeeper, snapped his head up with a surprised expression on his weathered face.

“But listen to this, if you even consider leaving town, I will have you hunted down, and you will know not only the full wrath of the law but mine as well. Now go!” The flames flared up in her eyes and Du Bois believed every word she said. He left without hesitation and without stopping until he found his way back home.

Duchesse d'Aramitz, however, stayed planted in place. Thoughts and plans were weaving together, taking form until an idea was born. She turned to Lambert, “We'll let him sleep fitfully tonight. Tomorrow morning have the carriage ready for me. I have an idea.” A cunning smile came over her face as she left the room.

Chapter 2

Léa made her way through the village streets, basket on her arm with two books and lunch for the day. She always walked quickly, trying to avoid conversation with the villagers. Unlike her sisters, she loved their mountain home and the woods beyond it, and she didn't despise the villagers for being poor. They were now poor too after all. However, she couldn't quite converse with them easily either. The villagers' world was small and many of them couldn't read, so conversation revolved around things like how good the harvest was that year, whether or not the milliner had asked the butcher's daughter to marry him yet, had Henrietta had her baby, had Antoine built his house...it never varied. Léa understood that this was life as they knew it, there was nothing outside of the day to day for them, but she was at a loss as to how to truly be a part of it herself.

More than that, interacting with the villagers had become downright uncomfortable. There was this fascination with her appearance. They couldn't see beyond her outward beauty—her gentleness, her refined manners, her cleanliness, her sophisticated bearing, and, especially, her beautiful features and feminine form. In fact, they all called her Beauty. This pet name was given to her when she was little, and it managed to follow her to her new home. “You're so beautiful. When will you marry, Beauty? Have you met my son, Beauty?” were often the topics of discussion. The young men fawned over her, the young women were jealous, the older women meddlesome, and the older men adorably flirtatious. Beauty had a kind heart, so she took it all in stride, but it did wear a soul down and make it hard to find true friends. She just wished she had someone she could talk to, someone who took the time to see past her outward appearance.

Thus, for those reasons, she walked quickly and made as little eye contact as possible. This gave her somewhat of a reputation as being unsociable and odd, as a large part of village life was being involved in the

lives of your neighbors, but Léa preferred the loneliness to the discomfort of not being seen and accepted for who she truly was.

Today was Thursday, her favorite day of the week. The one person she could talk to with ease was Madame Beaumont, a once wealthy lady who now lived in reduced circumstances, much like Léa. She ran a small school for the peasant children. Madame Beaumont understood that if they could just learn to read, it would open up a much wider world for them. Léa assisted her once a week. She loved hearing Madame talk about her travels and borrowing her books. She also loved the children. They were so open to new ideas and full of the wonder of childhood. The children were enamored with her beauty as well, but it was far more innocent and endearing. This was the one place she felt truly at ease.

Madame Beaumont was just finishing a story as Léa stepped in. The hefty older lady, full of life and love, sat on a stool with a little over a dozen children seated on the floor before her. She was an excellent storyteller. Although she was able to bring some of her books with her when she moved to the village, it was but a small library. To make do, she told stories instead. It also ensured that the children would remember them and perhaps be able to pass them on to their families, especially if the children could not attend the school long enough to learn to read. Oftentimes they were called away without warning to help with their family's farm or trade.

"And so the young prince lives in his tower to this day, alone and lonely, waiting for the day when someone can look past his mangled form and show him the love he so deeply yearns for."

A small hand popped up. "Yes, Marcus?" the teacher responded.

"Teacher, is your story about the monster that lives in the Rousseau house?" Marcus asked in his sweet little boy voice.

"If I were, Marcus, do you think the young man in my story would appreciate being called a monster?"

Marcus thought for a moment, "No...but Monsieur Rousseau is a monster, isn't he?"

"I heard he has fangs," another voice spoke up.

"I heard he prowls at night looking for stray children to eat," an older boy said as he pounced on his little sister next to him, causing her to yelp.

Then the room broke out into a chorus of “I heard” until it was rather like a nest of baby birds all crying at once for their mother’s attention.

“Children, children, please,” Madame called out as she attempted to hush the crowd. She looked at each of them with her no-nonsense, listen-to-my-wisdom look that Léa loved so much. Léa put a finger to her lips to cover an amused smile as the children calmed down and gave the teacher their attention.

“How would you feel, my dears, if you had something different about you and were called a monster for it? Hmm? Have any of you actually seen Monsieur Rousseau for yourselves?”

They all hung their heads in shame as they contemplated.

“Can anyone tell me what the lesson is from the tale I have just told?”

A few hands popped up. The teacher picked one and the child replied, “To make yourself as beautiful as possible so you don’t end up alone.” The children burst out in laughter.

“Not quite,” she said as she lifted her hands to calm them. “Anyone else?”

One hand raised up slowly.

“Yes, Antoinette?”

“I would say, to not be afraid of people who are different, because there may be more to the story than we know.”

Madame beamed at her, “A very good answer, my dear. Now, all of you play in the yard for a little while before our lesson.”

The room exploded with whoops and hollers as all the children stumbled over each other to get outside. They all said their hellos to Léa as they went. Madame Beaumont eased up from her stool and greeted her, kissing her on each cheek, and taking her hands.

“Who were the children speaking of?” Léa asked.

“Do you not know?” Madame asked in surprise. Léa shook her head.

“I know you have not been here long, but I thought surely you’d have heard the tales by now. Anyway, come, sit by the fire and we’ll talk for a spell.”

Madame Beaumont's home was warm and inviting. The fire and neatly arranged furniture helped, but it was her motherly love for all who entered that made it so. Her house was finer than the average village cottage. She had a floral rug on the floor and beautiful statuettes on the mantelpiece. They sat across from each other in a pair of elegant, though worn, armchairs. All a sign of her fading wealth.

"There is a lot of mystery and, frankly, a lot of fear that spurs on the stories. However, the lady of the house rather encourages the talk herself." Léa was confused, but Madame continued, "They say that the son of Duchesse d'Aramitz and the late Duc Rousseau was born a hairy beast, more animal than man. The stories have grown over the years to the tales the children have heard, no doubt as a means to make them behave more than anything. The truth is no one knows what the young monsieur is like as no one has seen him. He is kept hidden away and no one from the household even comes to the village anymore."

"You said the lady of the house encourages these tales, why?"

"I was a bit misleading by saying that, she does not encourage the stories as such, but she makes sure that no one steps a foot on her property. Anyone found there is treated harshly and always comes away with some charge brought against them. So, she makes people afraid of her and in a way confirms the stories that are told. I do my best to counter them with my own stories. I don't know why Duchesse d'Aramitz has chosen to do these things or what birth defect has perhaps afflicted her son, but the fear will only lead to trouble I'm afraid."

"Hm, how lonely he must be," Léa spoke barely above a whisper as she stared into the fire, a faraway look on her face.

Madame leaned toward her and put a hand on her arm. "And how are you, *mon chou*? Lonely yourself perhaps."

Léa shook herself from her daze and smiled ruefully, "Perhaps. Shall I get the readers out for the children now?"

"Yes, but don't think you can hide your feelings from me, I see it in your eyes."

Léa sighed as she pushed up from her chair and stood before the closest bookshelf. "I may not be able to hide from you, Madame, but no one else sees. Some things are hard to talk about, even to you."

"Beauty, come here, child."

Madame held out her arms as Léa picked up the readers and came to kneel before her. The woman took her shoulders and assured her, "Someday someone will see the beauty that is inside you just as much as they see your beautiful form."

Léa looked down at the books in her hands and asked with a hint of sadness in her voice, "And how do you know?"

Madame gently lifted Léa's chin and said, "I just know."

After lessons were finished, the children had all gone, and Léa finished cleaning up, she stepped out into the waning afternoon sunshine to return home. Few people remained in the open square as many were busy at home preparing the evening meal. She enjoyed the quiet and walked at a more leisurely pace than she had earlier in the day.

The one place that was still busy was the tavern. As she neared it she heard raucous laughter and male voices coming from inside. An elderly man sat on a low chair outside the door. Léa smiled as she approached. Martin was a kind, simple man who was quite fond of her.

"Hello, Martin! How are you today?" she called out as she approached and stopped to talk with him while no one else was around.

"Oh, I can't complain. And how is my Beauty? Those little scamps haven't been giving you too much trouble have they?"

"Not too much today," she laughed. Martin's skin was suntanned and leathery. What teeth he had were rotting, and he was hunched over with a back that had been worn down by many days of hard labor. Léa liked him.

Before they could continue their conversation further, a loud voice called from inside, "Beauty, my darling!"

A young man, handsome and muscular, appeared in the doorway, followed closely by Léa's youngest brother, François.

"Olivier," she responded without emotion, stepping back as she did.

Olivier was a hunter, and that of bigger game than her father. And unlike her father, he was quite good at it. His chiseled features, ample upper arms, and exceptional height made him arguably the most handsome man in the village—and he knew it. It was only right, according to him, as the handsomest of men that he should marry the most beautiful of women,

and that happened to be Léa. He drew closer in spite of her rather obvious move to step further away. As he loomed over her, she boldly stared up into his face. It was handsome, yes, but his smile hid something. Something that Léa couldn't put her finger on but didn't like. He had the scent of ale on his breath and that of dead animals and forest on his person.

"How are you today, Beauty?" he asked but didn't wait for the answer, "I was hoping to spend more time with you and here you are! I shall walk you home."

"Oh, that's really not necessary, Olivier, I'm sure my brother can escort me," she eyed her brother pleadingly. He leaned against the door frame and took a long drink from his mug.

"I'm not coming home yet, you go on," his expression was sullen and indifferent, partly from being drunk and partly because he truly did not care.

Sensing her discomfort, Martin struggled to stand and pushed at Olivier with his cane, "Move aside, young man, I was getting ready to take Beauty home."

Léa appreciated his kindness and understanding but feared Olivier wouldn't give up on his prey so easily. Yes, that is what his smile hid, he was on the hunt and she was his prey. He was rather like a beast. A very pretty beast.

"Move aside, old man," he mocked as he shoved Martin back into his seat.

Léa swallowed hard. "Leave him alone, Olivier," she said as her hands began to shake. She clenched them to steady herself.

He turned back to her and seeing her expression, softened his tone, "Shall we go?" Flashing a charming smile, he swung his arm around her shoulders.

"No, I'd rather we didn't," she spoke a little too loudly and pulled her shoulder away. "I can walk myself." Taken aback by her lack of compliance, he stepped away for a moment.

François held his mug halfway to his mouth and glared at her disapprovingly. Just then a rowdy group of men came out of the tavern and surrounded Olivier. Léa didn't wait, she took off toward home.

Well away from town now, open fields lay before her on either side of the road. Tall emerald grass swayed in the breeze. It was so inviting, so peaceful in the warm orange glow of late afternoon. Her hands were still shaking and her mind tumultuous, why couldn't he just leave her alone? She glanced behind her to make sure no one was following, then took off into the field and just ran until her body relaxed and her mind eased. Dropping her basket, she plopped down into the grass, sprawling out to watch the clouds for a bit. She closed her eyes and released the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding.

Olivier's behavior she'd come to know and expect, though it still affected her, it didn't hurt her as much as her brother's indifference or, even worse, his encouragement of the behavior. The truth was François wanted her to marry Olivier. The man was well enough off that it would help their family, and his influence among the villagers might promote François' own chances of eventually getting back to Paris, and thus the life he was used to. Father would never force her into marriage, he relied on her too much, but if François were able to persuade their oldest brother that it was a good idea, would her own resolve stand? Her options were limited.

Léa sat up and took out the book that she'd brought with her from Madame Beaumont's house. Inside was a picture of a milkmaid and farm boy, blissfully gazing into each other's eyes in an idyllic garden. Léa touched the page and sighed, then looked up at the wide open sky. "What does my future hold and what is there for me here?" she said to herself. *I have a plan for you*, a whisper of a voice blew past her on the wind. Shaking her head, she closed her book, picked up her basket and ran until she reached the safety of her family's cottage.

Chapter 3

Before she'd even reached the door, Léa's second oldest sister, Marie, came bursting out.

"Beauty! What took you so long?" She was irritated. Panting lightly from the jog over, she went on, "Something has happened to Father, he hasn't said a word all afternoon, says he's waiting for all his children before he explains."

"Explains what? Is he hurt?" Léa started toward the house, worried for her father.

"Didn't I just tell you he wouldn't tell us anything?" Marie put a hand on her hip and gave Léa a sour look.

Léa didn't respond to this, but quickly pushed through the partially open door. Her father sat in his chair in front of the fireplace, elbows on his knees and head in his hands. Léa rushed to him and knelt down.

"Father, dear, what has happened? Are you ill?" She placed a hand on his arm.

He slowly lifted his head and glanced at her then stared into the fire. She couldn't tell if his expression was one of sorrow or guilt, maybe both.

"I am well, Beauty, do not trouble yourself on my account," his words were tender, but he didn't offer more than that. Rather than easing her fears, his words just added to the confusion, for something was terribly wrong even if he wasn't physically wounded.

"What has happened? Is there anything I can get you?" she had to ask. Marie stood at the door and rolled her eyes.

Du Bois turned and gave Léa a wan smile. Patting her hand, he said with more warmth, "My ever helpful Beauty. I will explain all when your brothers come in from the field."

"François is at the tavern, it will be a while before he returns." She stood and stared down at her father. "I will fetch Pierre and Jacques. If

something has happened, they shouldn't be left to dawdle their way home. Marie, where is Juliette?"

Marie groaned and crossed her arms, "Must you always be a mother hen and boss everyone around? How should I know where Juliette is? She left the room a while ago, and I didn't ask her where she was going."

"Well, go and look for her! Now!" Even good-tempered Léa could reach her limit. She rushed down the short hallway to the kitchen and out the back door. Scanning the field in front of her, she was both relieved and annoyed to see Pierre, Jacques, and Juliette sitting by the well. They seemed relaxed, talking and laughing as if nothing was going on. Léa stepped back toward the hall and called to Marie that she'd found Juliette. Marie hadn't moved from her spot by the door. Léa's hackles rose. Normally she could forgive her siblings' rude and lazy behavior, it was only natural after living a life of luxury all their lives and then being plunged into work they were not trained for or accustomed to. However, their complete thoughtlessness and lack of concern for their father was beyond reason even in light of those circumstances.

Léa stalked to the well. Pierre was leaning against it while Jacques sat perched on its edge. Juliette faced them as she told her story and examined her nails. They didn't even look up as Léa neared.

"Juliette, didn't you tell them that something is wrong with Father? Why are you all still standing here?" She was trying not to accuse them, but she couldn't keep all of the edge from her voice.

"Yes, I told them," Juliette responded with an unaffected glance. "We figured you would find us when you returned, there was nothing for us to do for Father inside."

"One of you could have come and found me and François. Even if you didn't know where he was, you knew in what direction I would be."

Jacques turned his head down in shame, but Pierre, whose temper always seemed to settle just below the surface, lashed out, "Jacques and I have been working all day! We're tired and hungry. I don't give a hang what Father's moping about. How serious could it possibly be? He sets traps to catch rabbits for pity's sake. Did his little bunny rabbit get away from him?" He gave a short laugh. "Juliette has said he's not ill or hurt and that he wasn't going to speak until we were all there. If it was that

urgent, why didn't he tell Marie to go fetch you?" He spat on the ground and stood up. "I'll be in when I've cleaned up." He turned back to the well and pulled up a bucket of water.

Léa looked pleadingly at Jacques. "Would you at least come with me to get François? I can't do it alone."

"Why not?" Jacques eyed her from his perch. He was more reasonable of the lot, but still wouldn't put extra effort forth if he didn't have to.

Léa hesitated and hugged her arms around herself, suddenly chilly, "François is drunk and he won't leave easily. I need help."

Jacques jumped down reluctantly and started walking. Léa turned to Juliette, "Will you please start supper at least?"

Juliette shrugged and continue looking at her nails.

"Juliette?" she tried again.

"Yes, I will!" Juliette put her hands down and trudged toward the house.

Léa hurried to catch up with Jacques and together they headed for the tavern.

The tavern was located in the circular town square, apparently no one thought it odd to make a town "square" circular. A large fountain was located at the center and several buildings made up the circumference. Some were shops, a tall boarding house, and then the tavern. As they approached, Léa saw that Martin was still sitting outside.

"Hello again, Martin. Are you well?" Léa asked pointedly, wanting to make sure the older man wasn't too hurt, but not wanting Jacques to know about earlier events.

"I am well, Beauty. I didn't think you would be back so soon."

"Is François still inside?" She ignored the comment.

"Yes. He hasn't passed me yet, that is."

"Thank you, Martin." Léa smiled tenderly at him and turned to step into the tavern. Before she did, Martin reached for her arm and leaned over to her ear, "Be careful, Beauty, *he's* still in there too."

"Thank you, I will," she patted his hand.

The tavern was dark, with just a few lamps lit along the walls. Several tables stood throughout the room with a smattering of men

dispersed among them. They walked up to the bar straight ahead where Jacques asked where their brother was. The barkeep subsequently pointed toward the fireplace to their right. Léa had a thought and asked the man if they had any stew today. She gave him a few coins for a pot and told him to keep it ready for her.

As they turned toward the direction their brother was supposed to be, they saw Olivier standing at the fireplace, foot on a stool, alternating between gulps of ale and boasting tales of his hunting excursions. A small group of men were sitting or standing around him. François was slouched down in an armchair across from him.

Léa stopped. Jacques turned back to her and lifted a brow in question.

“You go get him, Jacques. I’ll wait here.”

He shrugged but walked through the crowd to François’ chair. Leaning down, he spoke something into his brother’s ear. François sat up slightly and turned to look at Léa. Olivier noticed the look and followed it. When he saw Léa, he stopped mid-sentence and gave an elaborate bow in her direction, lifted his mug, and downed it. Léa turned her face away and folded her arms, impatient to be gone. Thankfully, François struggled to his feet without protest, though once he was standing, he had to lean on Jacques to stay upright. Léa picked up the pot of stew and wrapped François’ other arm around her to help support him. They left without issue, though she could feel Olivier’s stare follow them out.

As they neared the cottage, Léa left Jacques to take François into the house while she went around the back to the kitchen. She had a feeling that Juliette might give up on supper, but didn’t want to offend her if she had accomplished the task. Opening the door a crack and not seeing anyone, she stepped in and put the stew on the stove to keep it warm. Further scrutiny of the kitchen revealed a few slices of bread on the table with a knife by the unfinished loaf, and nothing more. Nodding her head in resignation, she went toward the front room where she’d last seen her father.

Du Bois was still in his chair, though it was now turned out with its back to the fire so he could face his children, who were all seated at different places throughout the room. François had been placed on a chaise

and was sound asleep. Jacques sat on the floor in front of him while Marie lay across another chair, her legs hanging over the arm, and Juliette lounged on a settee. Pierre sat in an identical chair to her father's on the other side of the fireplace, alternating between staring into the fire and whittling.

Pierre glanced up as Léa walked in, "Finally, let's get this over with, shall we?"

"Do you have somewhere to be, Pierre?" Juliette smirked.

He glared at her, but said nothing.

Du Bois held out his hand to Léa and she stepped forward to take it before settling on the hearth in front of the fire. The warmth felt good on her back. It had grown dark as they walked home and she was now chilled. Du Bois appeared ragged as he looked around at his children.

"Go ahead, Father, tell us what has happened," Léa encouraged him.

"Well, my children, it has been an interesting day. An interesting day full of woe that I could not possibly have foreseen," he started. All the children exchanged glances with one another, now interested in what their father had to say. "Have any of you heard of the Rousseau family who lives in the château on the other side of our woods?"

"Yes, yes, I just heard of them today," Léa offered, "there are stories about the son, and the mother, she...Oh, Father! Did you wander onto their property?"

"You have guessed it, my Beauty. I meant no harm. I was on the hunt when I stumbled upon their property. I was brought before the great lady herself and treated contemptibly, she wants to charge me with poaching, thieving, and trespassing. But, what is this about the son?"

Everyone was attentive and sober now, except François, who was still asleep.

"Madame Beaumont told me that Monsieur Rousseau, the son, was kept hidden from the world, no one knows why, but there are many stories about him. The children call him a monster. Others say he was born a beast. She said Duchesse d'Aramitz charges anyone who trespasses to the full extent of the law. What are we to do?" Fear gripped her throat and she tried to keep the tears at bay; they wouldn't be helpful now.

"I'm afraid prison will be the only option," he conceded.

Pierre stood up and pounded his fist against the wall. Juliette went into hysterics and Marie's face clouded over. Jacques remained quiet, head bowed in contemplation.

"Father, you fool, why would you trespass on someone's property?" Marie lashed out.

"Thieving, Father? What did you steal?" Juliette was likely more interested in what the object was rather than the fact that he had stolen something.

They all turned to him, waiting for his answer. Du Bois was miserable at his children's censure.

"The charge is highly exaggerated. It was only a rose, a single rose. I thought Beauty would enjoy it." He swallowed and looked down at the floor in guilt.

"Beauty?" Marie spat. "You're going to prison over a rose for Beauty?" She fumed as she went into the bedchamber and slammed the door behind her.

"Beauty always was your favorite," Juliette sobbed, "now we'll be completely ruined because of her!" She followed Marie, slamming the door as well. Du Bois closed his eyes and groaned.

Silent tears streamed down Léa's face. "The stew!" She shot up and ran to the kitchen. She stirred it and cried a little harder. Wiping her tears on her apron, she found some bowls and filled them for the men, adding the few slices of bread that Juliette had prepared to each bowl.

She brought the bowls of stew and set one on Pierre's chair. He immediately took it up and sat before the fire again, eating hungrily with the same sullen expression on his face. She handed one to her father, but he just held it. Jacques took his and ate slowly. Léa sat on the now vacated settee and stared ahead, lost in thought.

"There is a small hope," Du Bois ventured, "After I begged for mercy, Duchesse d'Aramitz sent me home so she could consider further. Perhaps she will show mercy after all."

"A small hope indeed, Father," Jacques spoke for the first time. It was hard to tell whether he was holding on to that hope or whether he'd already given up on it. They all felt the same mix of feelings.

"Only the morning will tell us, I'm afraid," their father sighed.



The girls of the family shared the one room in the cottage, the boys shared the loft, and the father slept on a cot in the kitchen. With Marie shifting so much blame to her, Léa didn't think it right to join them in the bedchamber, especially since they shared one bed. She didn't think she would be welcomed there. Léa also knew she wouldn't be able to sleep even if she tried, so she decided to stay up in the sitting room. Du Bois was still in his chair by the fire, and François was snoring on the chaise. Léa curled up on the chair next to her father's.

"Papa, why is Marie so jealous of me? Why do the others seem to hate me so? I know you don't mean to show favoritism, but I can understand why they would think that you do. Aside from that though, I've never sought anyone's attention; in fact, I'd like to get away from most of it, yet she still takes it out on me. She is just as beautiful as I am—more in fact. Will she never see that I'm on her side?"

Du Bois gazed over at her with love in his eyes, "My dear, you have a good heart, and until Marie finds that for herself, forgive me for saying it, she will never be as beautiful as you are. Others see that too, it is not just a father's bias." He gave her a warm smile. Léa wasn't content with that answer and Du Bois saw it, so he continued, "Perhaps I do favor you, and that wrongfully. I've overindulged all of my children, and I am to blame for the faults I see in them. It's pure chance that you have turned out so unassuming. I was so caught up in business when you children were growing up. I thought I could assuage my guilt by giving gifts and pampering. And now I'm paying the price for lack of care." He ran a hand through his hair. "In fact, you all are suffering for it now. My children have no skills or experience for this life that we now live. If your mother were here, it never would have come to this. She kept me in line, and all of you as well. I...I am to blame for all of this mess." He lowered his head into his hands, rubbing his eyes.

"No, Father, you cannot take all of the blame. A life of pampering has made us all soft, yes, but showing disrespect and lack of familial care is entirely their own choice." She couldn't help but feel a little bitter. Her father had favored her, it was true, but she'd taken much of the household

work on herself as well as looked after the family all these years. She felt like the mother they never had, and they still persisted in blaming her for all their problems.

Du Bois turned to her and took her hands, “My dear, you have taken the family load upon yourself for many years, but you are the youngest of them all. I admire you for it, you know I do, but perhaps the others have come to resent you for it. You’re their baby sister, but you take the place of eldest. I should not have let you take on so much responsibility; indeed, it will not be so moving forward. Provided of course I’m here to enforce it.”

Tears came to Léa’s eyes; she let go of her father’s hands to dab at them.

Du Bois continued, “Coming face to face with the prospect of being torn from my family has made me think many things over. If I am taken away from you, promise me you will not continue like this. Pierre wants to take responsibility; in fact, he would like nothing more than to start his own family, but he feels trapped. He is only just learning what it takes to be a farmer, he barely has a profession, no money and no home of his own. That is why he is so angry all the time, he is frustrated and takes it out in unwise ways.

“Jacques is quiet, but he feels it all more than he lets on. He’s tired and would be better suited to a more educated profession. François is like a ship with no sails or anchor, he lacks direction and doesn’t know his place in this world. I fear if he does not find it soon, he will sink. Juliette only wants to be loved and thinks she will obtain that by beauty and wealth; with that gone, she is grasping at a life that is no longer in reach. It scares her. Marie—oh, Marie. She is the true baby of the family and receives none of the attention. She needs her papa.” His voice cracked and he choked back a sob.

“You see, I do know and love each of my children,” he laughed and wiped his tears. He turned his head to her, “And, Léa, my sweet Beauty, she cares for her family dearly, but it is too much for someone so young to bear on her own. She needs rest and the chance to live her own life.”

“Father, you haven’t called me by my name in years,” she smiled and hugged her arms around herself.

“Are you cold? Here.” He eased up out of his chair and pulled a blanket off of the couch. He laid it over her and tucked it in around the edges. Léa observed him as he did. She hadn’t noticed how gray he’d become or how much the lines between his eyes had deepened, yet he was still as handsome as ever. His chestnut brown hair was getting long on top, he needed it cut. He often ran his fingers through it when he was stressed or deep in thought. He was of average height; his sons were taller. All of his children had inherited his pleasant features. Juliette perhaps wore a little too much rouge. The warmth of the blanket made Léa immediately drowsy, and it didn’t take long as she leaned her head against the side of the chair before she was fast asleep.

Chapter 4

L éa woke slowly, stretching out her arms and back. She looked over, but her father was no longer there. François was still asleep—on the floor—where he must have rolled to during the night. Léa laid her blanket over him, then grabbed a shawl from the hook by the door. Looking outside, she noticed it was still somewhat dark; the sun would rise soon. Du Bois was outside pacing, arms clasped behind him, head down. Léa opened the heavy wooden door and went out to him, the gravel in front of their cottage crunching under her feet as she went. Du Bois turned and held his hand out to her. She melted into his arms as he hugged her tight. When she looked up into his face, she could see he was deeply anxious. The soberness of the situation settled on her in that moment.

Along with the first rays of the sun, a rumbling of carriage wheels could be heard and a dust cloud could be seen coming along the road.

“Well, Beauty, time to face my fate. The Lady hasn’t wasted any time in bringing my doom,” he heaved a sigh, “so much the better, I’ve been up all night waiting.”

“Father...” she answered weakly, tears of fear beginning to form as her face constricted in worry.

“All will be well, my love, don’t break my heart with your tears,” he lifted his hand to her face, tears forming in his eyes as well. He composed himself and turned toward the road, moving her behind him in a protective stance.

As the carriage pulled up in front of them, Pierre, Juliette, and Marie stumbled out of the house. Pierre was shirtless and Juliette and Marie still in their night clothes. François tripped through the door, cringing and blinking at the new light of morning. “What’s going on?” he croaked.

The footman jumped down from his place at the back and opened the carriage door, holding out his hand to aid Duchesse d'Aramitz out. So stately, so regal, so prepared to ruin a man’s life. She stood for a moment

and observed the man and his daughter. As she approached them, she deigned a glance to the others then focused on Du Bois again.

“I presume these are the children you spoke of?” she began.

“Yes, Madame,” he got down on one knee and continued, “Duchesse d'Aramitz, I must apologize, at the time when we met, I knew nothing about your son. I did not know...”

“You did not know what?” a harshness entered her tone, “Hmm? What have you heard about my son?”

“I just heard the stories...” he stopped, nervous at what he might be implying.

“The stories, is it? You didn’t know that my son was a monster or an animal, is that what you mean?”

“No, I did not mean to imply...” There was nothing he could say to rectify the situation now. It seemed his fate was sealed. Léa quietly stepped forward.

“What my father means to say, Duchesse, is that he was not aware that he would be intruding by coming upon a neighbor’s property and that had he known you and your son preferred such privacy, he would never have presumed to trespass,” she spoke with politeness and grace, but confidence. Inwardly her heart was pounding, but it only served to spur her on in defense of her father, who she firmly believed was, mostly, innocent.

Duchesse d'Aramitz scrutinized her for several moments. Léa started to feel ill at ease over what must be a rumpled, slept-in appearance, when the lady turned and surveyed the even more rumpled group behind her. Léa turned as well. Pierre stood with his muscular chest bare and his arms folded, head held high. Juliette and Marie showed a mixture of pride and defiance. François was a little more sobered, but he still leaned unsteadily against the door frame and had a completely befuddled look on his face. She wasn’t sure where Jacques was.

The lady turned back to Léa. She could tell by the look in the lady’s eyes that she had decided something as she turned to the still kneeling Du Bois.

“Get up,” she demanded. He did so. “I have an alternative for you.” She had their complete attention. “If your daughter here will agree to marry my son, I will agree to drop all charges against you.”

A stunned silence descended on everyone, including the carriage driver and footman. Léa held her breath. François, now fully awake, stumbled forward a few paces.

“Did you hear me?” her words severe.

“Yes! Yes, I’m sorry...um...Madame,” Du Bois stumbled through his words, then chuckled a bit, “I couldn’t possibly.” He found his voice, “I mean no offense to your son, but I couldn’t possibly trade my daughter’s life for my own.”

Léa put a hand to her head as her thoughts scrambled.

“She would be treated well, I assure you. You and your family will be compensated,” she continued as if she didn’t hear him, “My only stipulation would be that she remain at Château Rousseau and *no one* come to see her.”

“Duchesse, really, for you to presume...”

“How long will you give us to decide?” Léa interjected.

“A day.”

“A week,” she returned.

“Three days. And then I send a carriage to fetch you.”

“No need, Madame, I shall walk myself,” she insisted.

“I have not agreed to this!” Du Bois’ anger rose.

Duchesse d'Aramitz turned and re-entered her carriage.

“Three days. Starting today,” she stated before the footman closed the door.

As the carriage drove off, no one moved for several moments. Du Bois turned to Léa, but before he could speak, she put a hand on his chest and said, “Not out here, Father, let’s go inside. Please.”

They all made their way inside, a heaviness descending on them. Finally, Marie broke the silence, “I think it only right for Beauty to take this upon herself for the sake of the family, seeing that it is because of her this all happened.”

Suddenly everyone spoke at once.

“It might not be a bad prospect if we are compensated and she is treated kindly,” this from Pierre.

“But what about Olivier? Perhaps he could do something, or we could say she is engaged to him already. And what the blazes is going on here anyway?” François exploded.

“What I want to know is why she would choose Beauty! I’m the oldest daughter and equally as beautiful. Imagine living richly again! I was born for such a life! I’m sure I wouldn’t need to see the man that often...” Juliette went on.

“Enough! Enough!” Du Bois shouted over them all. “This is your sister we’re talking about! There is no way I could ever agree to such a marriage. Ever!”

Everyone quieted and, slowly, each one turned their eyes on Léa.

“Father, perhaps we should discuss this privately,” she finally spoke.

“All of you go get dressed!” Du Bois snapped and heaved a great sigh. He turned away from them and put his hands on his hips.

Each one left to their respective rooms. Léa waited until Du Bois turned and sat next to her on the settee. They didn’t say anything for a moment, just sat and held each other’s hands.

When she spoke, there was a calm to her voice, “Father, I know you would never willingly agree to this.” He grunted and sniffed as tears came to his eyes. “And that is because you love me so much. I can’t tell you what it means to me to hear you stand up for me and be willing to give yourself to prison rather than see me unhappy.” He looked into her soft and loving brown eyes as she continued, “But, Father, consider the opportunity that’s been placed before us. Perhaps the means by which it has been presented to us are less than ideal, but listen, who would I have to marry in the village? Olivier? Martin?” She laughed softly and Du Bois smiled reluctantly, then she grew serious, “I must confess that the prospect of the unknown is more desirable to me than the one that is known.”

Du Bois turned to her in surprise, “I would never force you to marry Olivier, you know that.”

“Yes, I do, but consider, the longer I refuse, the more of a burden I am on the family. The more François and Juliette will hate me. The more the prospects of all of them will diminish.” She lowered her head and closed her eyes, then opened them and stared directly at her father to say, “I don’t believe Olivier will give up on his prize that easily, and not even you may be able to stop him. At least if I go to the château with Duchesse d'Aramitz, I will be safe from him. As spiteful as she is, I know she does

what she does out of love for her son. That's something, isn't it? And I will be giving my brothers and sisters a chance at a better life."

"And what of the son? What if he is everything people say he is?" his words grew desperate.

"Madame Beaumont doesn't think that he is, and I trust her more than any of those gossips. Anyway, I believe Duchesse d'Aramitz when she says I will be treated well. She had no reason to promise such a thing given the power she has over us, unless she meant them."

Du Bois was struggling, "How can I possibly say yes to this? And yet how can I possibly say no? Oh, Beauty, you have no idea how powerless I feel to defend my own child. Were I still what I once was, this would never have happened. Curse that fleet of ships! Curse my curiosity! Curse the day I was born!"

"Father, don't say anything more now, you need rest. You haven't slept all night, and we still have three days to talk this over. Lay down now and you'll have a fresher mind to talk later."

He sighed again, "Very well, I know when to admit defeat." He touched her cheek and leaned down to kiss her forehead, then rose and went to his cot in the kitchen.

Léa leaned against her knees and pressed her hands to her face. More than anything in this moment she wanted to get away, to be alone.

After walking to the large pines of the forest and letting the peace of the wind rustling through a thousand trees wash over her, Léa found a large boulder to sit on. Leaning her head against the tree behind her, she wept unhindered until the tears stopped flowing of their own accord. A twig snapped and Léa's head jerked up to find Jacques a stone's throw away. Caught, he walked tentatively toward her.

"Beauty, are you all right?" he asked, then turned his head in embarrassment, "I'm sorry, of course you're not all right. Is Father...has Father been taken away?"

"Taken away?" she was confused. Of course, he hadn't been there. "No, Jacques, Father is inside resting."

He came closer, "Then the lady will not press charges?"

"Come sit down," she slid over to make room for him, and he joined her on the rock. Unlike the others, he was dressed and appeared as

though he'd been that way for some time. "Where have you been?" It wasn't an accusation.

"I..." he began, "I couldn't bear to see Father dragged away like a common criminal. I know it was a coward's decision, but I just couldn't..."

"Oh, Jacques!" she slid her arm around his waist and leaned her head against his shoulder. He hesitantly placed his arm around her and they sat that way for a moment.

"I'm sorry I didn't show more concern last night, and I'm sorry I'm such an awful brother."

"I don't think you're awful, Jacques, I never have."

He hugged her a little closer and leaned his head on hers.

"So, what did she decide? About Father, I mean," he asked.

Léa sat up and hesitated, then stood up and walked a few paces, turning back toward him.

"Duchesse d'Aramitz wants me to marry her son in exchange for Father's release from any further obligation."

"What?"

"And I have accepted that arrangement."

"Beauty...I...is there nothing to be done? Can we fight this?"

Her siblings had never shown her as much care as she saw in Jacques' face in that moment.

"I don't believe so," she looked down at her hands, "I fear this is my best option, in fact."

Léa went on to explain everything. It felt good to have someone other than her father to talk to about it, to find a friend in Jacques. It brought her the small measure of comfort she was desperately seeking in that moment.



Duchesse d'Aramitz smiled to herself as she exited the carriage back at her palatial home. Inside, she found Francine, the housemaid.

"Where is Monsieur Rousseau, Francine?" she inquired.

"I believe he is in the garden, Madame."

Duchesse d'Aramitz nodded her acknowledgement as she took off her gloves and started in that direction. She should have known that's where her son would be, he spent most of each day in there or the garden cottage. It was sheer providence that he wasn't there when the horrid Monsieur Du Bois invaded it. It was all coming right now, though, a silver lining, as it were, to the potential disaster. If only her husband were alive to see his son married. It was his idea at the start to hide their son away, to make him nonexistent to the nobility and something fearsome to the villagers. Though she protested at first, not wanting to isolate her son, she soon came to see the soundness of her husband's reasoning. It was safer this way.

But to see her son married, happy, that was her greatest wish. One that had begun to look impossible. There was no way to trick a noblewoman into marriage without the entire court knowing, but it was unthinkable to her to settle for some backwoods peasant. Mademoiselle Du Bois was no princess, but she was of an acceptable rank and bearing. Yes, this situation was perfect, if she could convince her son of her brilliant plan. Audric was a man of conviction, something she admired, but which made her schemes harder to carry out. She knew he wouldn't be happy about this one—at first anyway.

She opened the garden door and, not seeing him, made her way over to the small stone cottage that had been built within the garden for her son's use. As she approached, she could see Audric through the window sitting at his desk, scribbling away at something with several books open around him. She knocked and opened the door without waiting.

"Audric, if you aren't too busy, I would like to speak to you about something."

"Yes, Mother, let me just finish one thing," he went back to his writing.

Duchesse d'Aramitz stepped back outside and admired the roses that her son took such great pride in. When Audric came out, he gave her a warm smile and kissed her on each cheek.

"Good morning, Mother, you're up early," he put on some gardening gloves and took up a pair of shears as he started examining the flowers.

“Yes, I had some business in the village this morning,” she tried to sound innocent.

“The village?” his brows lifted in question as he continued his work, “What kind of business could you have there?”

She decided a straightforward approach might be better, “Audric, I have found you a wife.”

His head shot toward her, “A wife?” he laughed nervously, “I wasn’t aware one could just be found; was she in some shop in the marketplace on display?”

“Audric, I’m serious. I had some business with her father and she has agreed to marry you.”

He examined her face for a moment, then went back to his roses, “Business with her father? Did she agree *willingly*? Does she know...”

“So many questions, can’t you just accept that your mama has arranged everything for you?”

“No,” he answered simply.

She sighed and clasped her hands, her next words must be chosen wisely: “I want grandchildren.”

Audric burst out laughing. “I’m sure Lisette will be happy to oblige when the time comes.”

“Lisette is a child,” his mother argued.

“She is of age.”

“It is unlikely that Lisette will settle here, and I will see her family but rarely.”

“You could go and live with her for a time, I am old enough to look after myself,” his voice was playful, he knew full well that she would never leave him for more than a short visit.

The Duchesse opened her mouth to argue more, then stopped and grew quiet. “I just want you to be happy,” she finally said.

He grew serious, “But at what cost? And who says that marriage is the sole source of happiness?” He went back to pruning his roses.

“Yes, but are you happy? Are you content to be alone?” she persisted.

He stopped and turned his head to the side as she placed a hand on his arm.

“You can’t hide it from me, I’m your mother, remember?”

He faced her and replied, “Do you really think that caging her with the beast will make her learn to love him?” He turned and strode toward the garden door, throwing the shears into the dirt and yanking his gloves off in frustration.

“Audric!” she called after him as he pushed open the door and stalked out.

Chapter 5

News traveled quickly among the villagers. It was only the day after Duchesse d'Aramitz's visit, but already they were whispering and staring as Léa walked by them in town. She had to see Madame Beaumont. The woman was the closest person to a mother that Léa knew and so needed her wisdom and comfort.

Coming up to her house, she knocked. The servant answered the door and told her Madame was out at the moment but knew she would return shortly. So Léa decided to wait in the sitting room. She went to the bookshelf and chose a book, then sat in her usual chair by the fire. After reading the same paragraph several times, she finally gave up; she simply could not concentrate.

Léa was lost in thought when the front door burst open and in swept Olivier. Léa started and half rose from her chair, but he came toward her quickly and planted himself in the chair opposite her. She looked around for the servant, who rushed down the hall at the sound of the door with a look of confusion.

"Mademoiselle?" the maid questioned.

"Go find Madame and tell her a visitor has arrived," she tried to communicate urgency in her look, then turned back to Olivier.

"Do you make a habit of barging into other people's homes?" she asked more coolly than she felt, then sat up straight, every muscle in her body tensed at his uninvited presence.

"Only when you are present, darling Beauty."

Was that supposed to be a compliment? she thought to herself.

"I've come because I've heard of your predicament and knew I could help. You see, I've come to rescue you," his smile was proud. He was so annoyingly sure of himself.

"I wasn't aware that I needed rescuing," she answered flatly.

He gave a short humoring laugh and continued, "You see, if we marry today, the Rousseau family can have no legal claim on you."

“That would solve nothing, Olivier, my father would still be arrested and imprisoned if I do not fulfill my obligation to them.”

“Yes, but then we would be married and we’d all be better off,” he chuckled again.

Léa blinked at him. Madame Beaumont came in then, a concerned expression on her face, sparing her from continuing such an insipid conversation. Seeing Olivier, she straightened up and turned on her commanding schoolmistress face. She set down her basket full of parcels and came around the chair to face the man.

“I am not in the habit of admitting uninvited men into my home, Monsieur, especially when I am not at home to admit them!”

Unfazed, he turned back to Léa, “So what do you say? Shall we?”

Madame looked between them, hands on her hips.

“Shall we what?” Léa wasn’t going to give him an inch.

“Why, marry of course!”

“Well, that would explain the priest that’s standing outside my door,” Madame huffed.

“Priest?” Léa asked in surprise. She took a moment to gather her wits and courage. Standing, she stared straight into Olivier’s eyes, “I will not, and will never, marry you, Olivier.”

He smiled as if she were joking. Upon seeing her determined expression, he blanched, then turned angry.

Rising slowly, he came alarmingly near her face. She turned her head to the side and he grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him. Madame tried to grab his arm, but he shoved her away.

“Very well, *Beauty*,” he emphasized the word with a sneer, “don’t marry me, but you will come to regret the day you rejected a man for a beast.” He stormed out of the house, slamming the door as he went.

Léa rubbed her chin and spoke without hesitation, “You are wrong, Olivier, I will not regret this day because today I rejected the beast for a man!”

The maid came over to make sure Madame was all right after being shoved. After assuring her she was well, Madame quickly went over and locked the door. Adjusting her hair, she let out a sigh and came back to the other two ladies. “Perhaps some tea is in order.” The maid nodded her agreement and went to the kitchen.

“Are you all right, Beauty?” Madame sat down in the now vacant chair and put a hand on Léa’s knee.

“I am fine. This has only confirmed my decision and erased any doubt that still remained. You have heard the news, I’m sure.”

“I have but would like to hear it from your own lips. Town gossip isn’t the most reliable,” she sniffed.

By the time she was done with her tale, tea had been served and they sat sipping it and eating biscuits.

“I wanted to hear your advice and hoped that you would share any insight and information you might have about the Rousseau family.”

Madame put down her tea cup and leaned over her knees, looking into the girl’s vulnerable eyes.

“You are so very brave. Your family is fortunate, indeed, to have such a loving daughter and sister.”

“I don’t feel brave, not at all,” tears choked Léa’s voice.

Madame Beaumont came around and sat on the arm of Léa’s chair and took her in her arms. She kissed her head as Léa nestled into her.

“I’m afraid I don’t have anything more to offer you about the son. The late Monsieur Rousseau was always a private man, even before his son was born. I knew him and his wife before they came here, and before my own fall from grace. I do agree with you that Duchesse d’Aramitz would not have promised fair treatment if she didn’t mean it, she’s not one to mince words. But of course I cannot guarantee that since there is so much mystery surrounding the family. I want you to be prepared—to prepare your heart and mind—for the possibilities.”

Léa turned her head up. She was so grateful to have this woman in her life at such a time as this. “Will you help me? Prepare myself, that is.”

“Of course, *mon chou*. We can talk things over for a time, but there is one thing I want you to do before you go home and spend your remaining time with your family. I want you to take some time to yourself here, where you can have quiet and privacy, and work out your own feelings. To perhaps grieve, cry, be angry if you wish,” she smiled and hugged her. “All that you do is for others, for a little while I want you to give yourself some time, answering to no one but yourself.”

Léa nodded. Madame stepped out for a moment to give some direction to her maid and then came back. The two talked as any mother

might talk to her daughter on the eve of her wedding, only with a much more somber bent. Finally, Madame led her to a room upstairs where a warm bath was prepared. “Take your time, dear Beauty,” she said and told her to come find her when she was ready to walk home.

Léa undressed and soaked in the warmth of the water. With it came a flood of emotion that surprised her. Of course she was upset about the situation, needing to marry a man she’d never met was unexpected and thus disheartening, but not so wholly unusual either. Needing to escape a man she had met certainly added to the distress of the situation. But she also found that her heart ached for the “might have beens.” She mourned for the loss of a dream, of falling in love and having her own home with a loving husband. She grieved that she wouldn’t be able to see her family again. She fumed at her siblings for their cold-hearted reaction to it all and at her father for being so foolish as to go where he didn’t belong and take something as silly as a rose, even if it was for her. Finally, after the tears were gone, she plunged under the water and came up with a measure of peace and acceptance in her heart and mind.

A new dress and linens were laid out on the bed. She touched the simple but pretty burgundy dress, Madame had thought of everything. After dressing, she brushed out her hazelnut brown hair, braiding it into a single plait. She went downstairs to find Madame Beaumont, who was reading by the fire.

“You look lovely, Beauty. And confident. Have you worked things out with yourself?” she asked.

“Yes. For now.” She took in a shaky breath. “Thank you so much for the dress, and just for everything. I can’t tell you what it means to me.”

“Well, I had a feeling your father would not think of such things,” she smiled, “Are you ready to return home?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Hannah and I shall accompany you home, and we will take the long way round to avoid a certain tavern that I fear may hold someone we’d rather not see at the moment.”

Madame pulled two books off the shelf then picked up the basket with the parcels that she had brought in earlier, and they set off for home. They skirted the town square through an alley and made their way back

onto the path once they were well away from town. When they came within sight of the Du Bois family cottage, Madame stopped.

“We shall leave you now. We don’t want to intrude. Now take this,” she handed her the basket, “it’s nothing much, but I wanted you to have a little something to bring a smile to your face. Open what you will when you’re feeling especially homesick.”

The women embraced long and hard. Madame Beaumont finally kissed her cheek and pulled back, her eyes moist with unshed tears.

“Goodbye, and God be with you.”

Léa watched them for a moment as they walked back, her heart aching, then turned toward home.

Inside, she was pleased to find everyone gathered, including Martin. There were wildflowers and what appeared to be the girls’ hair ribbons decorating the sitting room. Her father approached her and kissed her cheeks, a sheepish smile on his face.

“We decided a party was in order for our Beauty,” he beamed, “Marie gathered the flowers, and Juliette decorated.”

“I used my best ribbons, Beauty,” she added.

“Pierre bought a hog, it’s already roasting.”

“It smells delicious!” Léa exclaimed. Her heart swelled, perhaps they did care after all.

“It was François’ idea to bring Martin along.”

“Hello, Martin! I’m so glad you came.”

“I wouldn’t miss it!”

François seemed a little put out, but he nodded in her direction.

“And, here, sit down,” Du Bois led her to his own chair, “Jacques, Martin, and I are to be your entertainment!”

They proceeded to bring out their instruments, Du Bois with his flute, Jacques with his lute, and Martin on the fiddle. They delighted everyone with their music, especially Léa, who savored it all. After that, Marie recited a rather solemn poem. Then they all feasted. Pork, potatoes, a variety of roasted vegetables, and several pies were among the sumptuous fare. Léa wondered where they got it all, for surely they didn’t make it, but said nothing, just appreciating the thought that was put into each element of the party.

As everyone lounged about after the feast and François took Martin home, Du Bois pulled Léa aside into the kitchen. They sat down on his cot and he hugged her to himself.

“How can I let you go, my Beauty?” he said more to himself than anything.

“What I want to know is how you will all survive without me,” she turned tear filled eyes up to him and laughed.

He laughed genuinely for the first time in two days, “I wonder that too, I surely do! Ohh,” he sighed, “Beauty, are you sure this is what you want? If you say the word, I will move land and sea to find some other way. I’m not afraid of prison, if I knew your brothers would look after you...”

“No, Father, I believe this is the right decision—for all of us.”

He stared at her for a long moment, “I shall accompany you tomorrow then.”

“No, I don’t think that would be best. Let’s not tempt Duchesse d’Aramitz further. I will leave in the morning, on my own.”

“Brave Beauty, I don’t deserve you.”

“Perhaps not so brave,” she turned her head down, “but determined.” She looked back up with exactly that in her eyes.

That night, as the girls prepared for bed, Juliette stood before the mirror brushing her hair. Her face was clean, all rouge and powder washed off. Léa sat in the bed observing her.

“You really are beautiful, Juliette,” Léa told her.

Juliette hesitated as her face softened for the briefest moment before she nonchalantly responded, “I know.”

“Promise me you’ll marry someone who deserves you.”

Juliette turned toward her, shrugged, and answered lightly, “Of course.” She put the brush away and climbed into bed beside her. Marie followed soon after next to Juliette. When the candle was blown out and the room was dark, Juliette spoke softly, “I’ll miss you, Beauty.” Marie turned onto her side to face the wall. “I’ll miss you both too,” Léa answered.

Chapter 6

L'éa dressed and had her belongings ready before the sun rose. She was anxious to have the worst of it over: the unknown. An attempt was made to eat some bread and butter for breakfast, but she could barely swallow for anticipation. Slowly everyone rose to bid her farewell. She embraced each one warmly, then made her way down the path to her new home. Léa feared staying too long would weaken her resolve and she didn't want to weep now with long goodbyes.

The clear morning air filled her lungs, giving her hope and energy. The clouds were white in the sky and the birds were chirping in the trees, a strange juxtaposition to the turmoil of her situation. When the gate of Château Rousseau came into view, her nerves surged into her fingertips and her stomach clenched into knots. A voice whispered on the breeze, *Don't be afraid...*

"Can I help you, Mademoiselle?" the gatekeeper called out, startling her into dropping one of the parcels from Madame Beaumont's basket. She bent to pick it up and looked over to see the gatekeeper standing in the door of the gatehouse. "I believe Duchesse d'Aramitz is expecting me, my name is Be—Léa Du Bois."

"Ah, yes, Du Bois. One moment, Mademoiselle." He took out a key from several at his side and unlocked the gates. It creaked as he opened one side. "Go on up to the house, they'll be expecting you," he said as the gate shut with a loud clang and the lock clicked away any escape.

Léa took a deep breath and turned toward the château. Her family had lived in a large home when Du Bois was still a merchant, but this was like a palace. The lawn surrounding and the flowers in pots were all neatly manicured. She climbed the steps and stood before the towering, ornately carved doors. *No going back now*, Léa thought as she took another deep breath and knocked firmly.

After several moments a manservant answered the door. He seemed slightly confused. "Mademoiselle Du Bois?"

“Yes,” her answer came out a bit breathless. Were they not expecting her?

“Forgive me, we assumed you would come as late as possible,” he cleared his throat and ushered her in, “Wait here, if you please.” The man was in his mid-sixties, tall and strong for his age. His white hair and long crisp coat gave him an especially dignified look. He disappeared up the grand staircase.

A few minutes later he came back down with a maid.

“Mademoiselle, this is Marguerite, she will be your lady’s maid. She will show you to your room and will come for you when the Duchesse is ready to receive you.” He gave her a warm, gentlemanly smile.

“Thank you...” she waited for his name.

“Ah, you may call me Devereux. We are very pleased for you to be here, if I may say so.”

“Thank you, Devereux,” she smiled at his warmth but didn’t say more.

Marguerite led her down the hall to the left of the main floor. She opened the third door down and waved Léa in ahead of her. A large four-poster bed with white sheer bed curtains tied back stood in the middle of the wall to her right. The bedclothes were a lilac purple. A wave of natural light came in through the large window on the back wall. Everything was neat and orderly, perfectly suited for a young lady. She could tell a great deal of care had been placed into its decoration and design. In spite of her nerves and uncertainty, the room was inviting and she couldn’t help but think how lovely it was.

“If you need anything, miss, just ring the bell.” The maid pointed to a bell pull on the wall. “I’ll be in soon to bring you to Duchesse d’Aramitz.” As she turned to leave, she hesitated, then turned back to her. “You are very lovely, miss.” She smiled shyly. “We all hope you will be happy here, and that you will be able to lift the master’s spirits.” She closed the door as she left.

As soon as the door closed, Léa let out a long breath. She held a hand to her stomach and closed her eyes. *Well, she thought, at least the servants seem happy and at ease, that could mean they have a kind master, right?* She turned to look at the room more closely. A dressing table and mirror sat across from the bed. It had brushes, powders, and perfume

neatly arranged on it. Glancing into the mirror, she was startled to see a worried little girl staring back at her. “Pull yourself together, girl, you’re nearly twenty-one,” she whispered to herself. She tucked a few loose strands of hair back and tried to smooth her braid out as best as possible. If she must face Duchesse d’Aramitz again, she wanted to look her best and muster up as much confidence as possible.

The basket of parcels fit nicely on the bedside table. She opened up the wardrobe and placed her bag inside. There was a single gown already hanging in the wardrobe, one suitable for wearing to the evening meal. Having nothing else to do, she sat down on the bed and sank into the feather cover, so soft! Glancing over at the basket that Madame Beaumont had given her the day before, she started sifting through it. There were two books tucked into the side—her favorites! Several small bundles were wrapped in brown paper. Deciding on one, she pulled it out, untied the twine and lifted the flaps of paper. Several chocolate truffles were inside. A card was enclosed that read, *What is a Frenchwoman without her chocolat?* Léa smiled and popped one in her mouth. It melted on her tongue and she closed her eyes to savor it. Folding up the rest, she tucked them back in the basket.

Just then a knock sounded at the door. Léa rose quickly and opened it to find Marguerite waiting. “Are you ready, Mademoiselle?”

“Yes, as much as I’ll ever be,” she couldn’t keep the groan out of her voice.

Léa thought she saw a slight tug at one side of the maid’s lips and an understanding look, but couldn’t be sure. They continued up the stairs to the second floor where she assumed the family rooms must be. The hallway went to the left and the right from the landing and Marguerite turned to the right. Léa looked down the left hallway, curiosity stirring inside her about whether her future husband were in one of those rooms. She turned back to follow the maid, who waited in front of a pair of double doors. Marguerite knocked ever so softly and a voice inside told her to come in. She opened the door for Léa but did not enter herself. As Léa stepped in, the door closed behind her and she was a little sorry she wouldn’t have the maid there as she faced the commanding mistress of the house.

Said mistress was seated in an exquisite armchair with another lady standing behind her. With a flick of a finger, she motioned for Léa to be seated at a simpler, but nonetheless fine, settee across from her.

“I must say I’m impressed, Mademoiselle Du Bois. I did not expect you to come so promptly. I am aware that you come here as a service to your father, a *martyris*, as it were, but I expect you to fulfill your side of the bargain with decorum, respect, and without grumbling.”

“Yes, Duchesse,” her voice held steady.

“I chose you because you displayed these qualities, as well as wisdom, grace, and maturity.”

Léa supposed these words were high praise from someone like Duchesse d'Aramitz, but they felt more like the words of a judge who was about to give her a sentencing.

“You are free to spend your days as you please, to roam the grounds as you wish; however, you are to stay away from the hedged garden. You shall not come up to the second floor of the house unless called for and accompanied by a servant, and you must *never* leave the property or speak to anyone from the village. Do I make myself clear?” Her demeanor was commanding and her voice firm. Léa doubted very much that anyone dared to cross her.

“Yes, Duchesse. I fully intend to be faithful to my word, as I expect you will hold to yours,” she spoke with calm dignity. Though she didn’t feel brave, the strength of her resolve for the purpose of protecting her family spurred her on to bravery. She could handle being taken from her family and isolated in this place with who knew what kind of man as long as the promised protection of her father was upheld.

“You speak boldly for one so young, and for someone in your position to speak to me thus,” she raised her chin, “but I assure you I never go back on agreements.” The Duchesse held Léa’s gaze for a moment. “Now, this is Madame Villeneuve, the housekeeper,” she gestured toward the woman standing behind her chair, who nodded congenially. “She will give you a tour of the grounds so you know exactly where you may—and may not—go. Tomorrow you will have a fitting done and new dresses made.”

“Oh, that is not necessary, Duchesse, I am quite content with what I have already.”

“Be that as it may, I will not have my son’s bride-to-be dressed as a common dairy maid. There is a gown in your wardrobe that you will wear for tonight’s meal, it should suit for now. Now, before you go, do you have any questions?”

“Yes, when shall we be wed?” The question had been burning on her mind as she found it strange that the lady hadn’t mentioned it yet, or given any indication of actually meeting the man she was supposed to marry.

Duchesse d'Aramitz evaluated her for a moment, then said, “I am leaving that up to my son. He is...shy, and has some hesitations about the situation.”

“But, Duchesse,” Léa’s face clouded. To be married to a stranger was one thing, even one they called a beast, but to not be married at all was far worse. What would happen if he never married her? She persisted, “What about my reputation? I may be poor, but I value my virtue and standing before God and man.”

Duchesse d'Aramitz sounded annoyed as she answered, “Your reputation is of little consequence as you will not be among society. My son shares your convictions, however, so you can be assured he will marry you at some point.”

Léa stared ahead, unseeing. How could she, a noble born lady, treat her concerns with so little respect?

The lady let out an exasperated breath and turned her head to the side briefly, then turned back to her, “No doubt you have heard the rumors about my son. Naturally they are baseless,” she continued through gritted teeth, “he is no animal.” She relaxed her shoulders, “But he is...unique. He won’t want you to see him at first. But, I trust, with time, the arrangement will be found agreeable. You can understand that, can’t you?”

Léa considered this. Madame Villeneuve gave her a reassuring, sympathetic smile.

“I can but try, Duchesse,” she answered softly.

Upon her dismissal, Madame Villeneuve escorted her out of the room and they began their tour. Léa was quiet as she contemplated her situation, so the housekeeper led her at a slow pace.

“The east wing is the Duchesse’s domain, and the west,” she gestured to the other side of the landing, “is Monsieur Rousseau’s.” She

had a gentle voice. They made their way down the stairs to the main entryway and Léa observed the woman as they went. The housekeeper had a graceful elegance to her, and a comforting motherly presence. She was tall and slender and had the beauty of one who has aged with grace. “The kitchens are through there, but if you need anything, you have only to ring and someone will assist you,” her words interrupted Léa’s observations. Devereux opened the front door for them, but Villeneuve paused before going out.

“You have met my husband, yes?”

Devereux winked at Léa and answered for her, “We met when she came in, my dear.”

“I thought as much, but wanted to make sure.” She smiled pleasantly, and they descended the steps as they walked around to the back of the property.

“Your husband? Do you have children here as well?” Léa was curious.

“Only my youngest, Édouard, he is Monsieur’s valet. Our other children all have families and employment elsewhere.”

As they approached the formal gardens, hedged paths and walkways lined with flowers abounded. Léa couldn’t help but perk up at the sight, what a pleasant place to have walks.

Noticing her interest, the housekeeper took that moment to confide in her, “Monsieur finds comfort here as well. If I might be so bold, Mademoiselle, you have no need to fear, I’ve known him since he was born and have never known him to be anything but kind and gentle.”

Léa’s heart filled with gratitude for her thoughtful words. “Can you tell me more about him? I’m sure I wouldn’t be half so afraid if I knew what to expect.”

They began to walk through the gardens together as she continued, “I’m afraid that some things are only for him to tell, but I can tell you that he is thoughtful, even toward his servants, though they are more like family to him. We have been his only companions, aside from his sister briefly, so he is lonely. Of course, none of us can quite fill the longing of his soul for a companion. He is perhaps a little unskilled, shall we say, in conversation, but that is to be expected for someone who has not learned the ways of society. A fact that also makes him less stained by the world’s

darkness. He may not fully understand what waiting to marry means in terms of your reputation, so he will defer to his mother's rather biased opinion. But, I assure you, if I know my master at all, he will not want to compromise your virtue."

"Thank you, Madame, your words are a comfort, to be sure." Léa gave her a warm smile. "You said he has a sister, where is she now?"

"Lisette lives with an aunt in Paris. She is quite a bit younger than the master and it was agreed that she should not be confined here. She was an affectionate little thing and adored her brother, but he was the one that encouraged sending her away. He wanted her to have a fuller life than he has been afforded. The girl was ten years old when she left here. The Duchesse visits her from time to time, but she has not been back since."

Léa still had questions. Why all this trouble? Why was there such a need to hide the man away? She knew Madame Villeneuve would not answer these questions, so she was grateful for the information that she was given and trusted that time would answer the rest.

They came to the end of the formal gardens where a straight path led to an enormous hedged garden.

"You may walk in the formal gardens and even the perimeter of the property, but the special garden is Monsieur's sanctuary. He tends to go there early in the morning and has a way of moving about the house clandestinely, so it is unlikely for you to cross paths accidentally."

Clandestinely? Léa thought, *That's rather unnerving.* She looked back again at the large private garden. So that was where her father plucked the rose and caused so much grief. She turned her head away; she didn't want to cry now.

"I will take you back to your room now so you can rest for a while. The midday meal will be brought there, and you will not be bothered for the rest of the afternoon. Marguerite will be back to help you dress for the evening meal."

Léa turned to her and touched her arm, "Thank you. Your words have eased my mind and given me hope."

Madame Villeneuve covered the young woman's hand with her own, "My pleasure. We all hope you will come to be happy here and that you'll find a companion in the master as much as he'll find one in you."

Léa smiled at the shared hopes of the servants, they truly did care for their master, but it was still too soon for her to share that hope. “Just one more question, Madame, if you don’t mind. Will I meet him tonight?”

“Yes, at the evening meal, I believe.”



“She’s here,” Duchesse d'Aramitz poked her head into the garden cottage to tell her son.

Audric glanced up from what he was reading and nodded his head in resigned acknowledgement then stared down blankly at his book.

“You shall meet her tonight at the evening meal.”

His head shot up, a look of genuine terror on his face. “I’m, I’m, not...ready,” he shuffled the papers on his desk.

“Don’t worry, my son,” she held up a consoling hand, “Lambert and Villeneuve have taken care of everything, you will not be seen.”

“But...how?”

“They will show you when it’s time.”

He nodded his head a few times and cleared his throat. “I’ll, uh, be there.” He managed a nervous smile.

“Good.” Her face softened from the scowl she’d had all morning. “There’s nothing to fear, Darling.” She moved to leave.

“Mother?” he called. “What’s her name?”

She furrowed her brow. “You know, I didn’t think to ask.”

Chapter 7

Léa woke from her nap feeling refreshed. She undid her braid and went to the vanity to brush out her hair. A knock sounded at the door and a muffled voice said, “It’s only Marguerite, Mademoiselle.”

“Come in,” she called back.

Marguerite stepped in and smiled from ear to ear.

“I’m here to help you dress, miss.”

Léa paled, “Is it time already? I must have slept longer than I thought. I’m afraid I haven’t slept well the past few nights.”

“And no wonder at that,” she approached Léa and moved to take the brush from her, “May I? It will be nice to be a lady’s maid again.” She started brushing through Léa’s hair with skilled gentleness, and the touch of her fingers felt luxurious.

“Again?” Léa wasn’t sure what she meant.

“Well, I haven’t had a lady to attend since the young mademoiselle left. I’ve been assisting as a housemaid since then, but I don’t prefer that kind of work.”

“Could you not find another position?”

“Oh, no, all of the servants have been here from before the master was born or were hired shortly after under the condition that they wouldn’t seek employment elsewhere. We’ve all been generously compensated, of course. But, we’ve come to love the master anyway and wouldn’t want to move on. He needs us.”

Léa observed the woman in the mirror, she must have been about thirty-five years old. “How long have you been here, Marguerite?”

“I was born here, actually. My father is the gatekeeper, and my mother worked here as well before she passed. I didn’t start work in the house till I was fifteen. The master was eight then, and I was his nursemaid until the young miss was born a few years later.”

Léa hoped that meeting the man would answer some questions about his odd living arrangements. Marguerite set down the brush and

went to get the gown out of the wardrobe. As Léa stood to be attended to she continued to probe for information, “So that would make him...how old now?”

“He just turned twenty-eight. Lisette, the girl, is seventeen. She’s been gone some seven years now. They thought to send me with her when she went away, but the aunt had her own fancy Parisian maids. It would be nice if she would come to visit.” Léa could hear the tenderness and longing in her voice. She must have been like an older sister to the girl, watching her grow from a babe.

The gown turned out to be a tad snug. Marguerite had to set her corset even tighter than normal and as the cinches of the dress were drawn, her every curve was accentuated. The dress was emerald green and elegantly inlaid with crystals. She hadn’t worn anything this fine even when they were still wealthy themselves. She was embarrassed at how womanly she appeared.

Upon seeing her discomfort, Marguerite was quick to assure her, “I am so sorry, Mademoiselle, we had to guess at your measurements. Tomorrow new dresses will be commissioned to your preference,” she continued in a gentle tone, “but you do look stunning.”

Léa laughed through her nose and turned to look at her, “Do you think so?” She turned to the side as she studied herself in the mirror and applied pressure to the bodice in an effort to set it more comfortably. “What will Monsieur Rousseau think of me coming in like some kind of princess?” Léa laughed again, then groaned and arched her back. She did look elegant, but it was not what she would choose for herself. “I suppose it will have to do, Duchesse d'Aramitz would not be pleased if I met her beloved son dressed like myself.” It felt good to laugh and let out some of the tension that had built up all day. She could tell Marguerite failed to see the humor and was a bit confused.

“Shall we do something with my hair now?” Léa encouraged her.

The maid gave her a broad smile, “Yes! I thought we could pin it up with this jeweled comb to match your dress.” She picked up one of the combs from the vanity and went to work as soon as Léa sat down. When she finished with the elegant pompadour, she picked up the face powder and rouge. “Oh, no, Marguerite, I couldn’t possibly.” She could see the maid was disappointed, it was clear that she was enjoying dressing her up

immensely. “Perhaps another time?” She tried to look into the maid’s down turned eyes. “I’m sure there will be many opportunities for such finery in the future.” She didn’t want to hurt her, but she needed to face this dinner with at least some dignity and a small measure of herself intact. Cosmetics were always Juliette’s forte, not hers.

“Of course, miss.” She seemed mollified for the present. “Are you ready to join the master in the dining room?”

Léa took as deep a breath as her gown would allow, “I believe so.”



Audric fiddled with the cuffs of his sleeves and smoothed his hair down. He didn’t know why he was so nervous about how he was dressed, his mother had assured him he wouldn’t be seen. Standing before the mirror, he scrutinized his appearance for a moment then turned abruptly and steadied himself on the post of his bed. He put a shaky fist to his lips, his breathing turned heavy as his chest compressed and his stomach churned. He started pacing anxiously up and down the room.

When a knock sounded at the door, he jolted. “We’re ready, Monsieur,” Madame Villeneuve’s voice came through. When the door was opened to her, she felt his anxiety immediately. Reaching up, she adjusted his cravat then ran her hands down his arms to smooth the sleeves of his coat. “You look handsome this evening, Monsieur,” her soothing voice gave no hint of question as to why he felt the need to dress so meticulously. “Now relax your shoulders, that’s it, you’re going to be fine.” Dear Madame Villeneuve was like a second mother to him, her presence calmed him and he finally felt ready—almost. “Shall we go down?” she asked. He nodded, afraid his voice wouldn’t cooperate.

As they descended the stairs, Audric stole a glance down the hall to the woman’s door, the woman who was intended to be his wife. Was she as nervous as he was? What must she think of all this? Or did she already hate him for the circumstances that brought her here? A flood of questions raced through his mind. He didn’t know what his mother had done to persuade her to come, but he doubted that any young woman would rejoice at the prospect of being so isolated, promised in marriage to a man

everyone believed to be a beast. Perhaps her motives were purely mercenary, a chance to escape village life and join a noble family.

They entered the informal dining room, where the family usually ate. Audric knew his mother would stay away, her presence would only make the girl uneasy, she had said. He hadn't been sure what Lambert and the housekeeper had come up with, but he now saw that they had constructed a sort of partition at the right-hand corner of the room, rather like a confessional booth. A door had been constructed into the side of the makeshift room. As he entered it, he saw a small table and chair set up. The room was dim, with only a single candlestick for light. He sat at the table and looked out. He could see the dining table clearly for the most part, albeit a little shaded and obscured.

Turning to Madame Villeneuve, who stood in the doorway of the shelter, he asked, "Are you quite sure I cannot be seen?"

"Yes, quite. The dimness of the room aids that effect. Now, if you don't need anything else, I need to make sure everything is in order in the kitchen."

He stopped her as she prepared to leave, "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Monsieur," she smiled affectionately, "If it helps at all, she is nervous too."

Taking a deep breath, he let it out slowly and leaned back in his chair. The quiet of the room settled Audric as the housekeeper exited and he waited for the young lady to arrive.

Finally, the door opened and Marguerite escorted, not the village girl that he expected, but a fine lady to the head of the table. The maid curtsied and left the room. The woman sat rather rigidly and seemed every inch the haughty socialite. Surely his mother had made a mistake in her choice. Thoroughly intimidated, but needing to speak, he cleared his throat and called out, "Good evening, Mademoiselle."

Léa jumped in her seat and scanned the room. Was his infirmity that he was invisible? *Good Heavens, of course that's not it*, she thought. "Where are you?" she said more calmly than she felt.

"Forgive me, I didn't mean to startle you but didn't know how else to manage it. I am behind the partition, straight ahead and to your left."

As she turned, he saw her face full on. The gentle curve of her jawline, her olive skin, her soft brown eyes. "You're...so beautiful," he

said softly.

Léa thought he almost sounded sad or disappointed. Between her nerves and the odd tone of his voice, she laughed. “If I may be so bold, Monsieur, you seem unhappy to find me so. Does my appearance not please you?”

Her laugh softened her formerly austere appearance and had the effect of butterfly wings inside his chest. “Oh, no! Forgive me, Mademoiselle, I just, uh...” he swallowed. The truth was he was so self-conscious of his own appearance, that he thought surely someone so lovely who likely had scads of men after her, would be even less likely to accept him than if she had been plainer herself. He finally decided on a safer route for the conversation, “What is your name?”

Léa tucked her head and couldn’t keep from laughing softly again. “My name is Léa Du Bois.”

“Why do you laugh?” He started to fear she was laughing at him.

“Forgive me, Monsieur, let me explain. You see, when I was born, so many people told my parents what a beautiful child I was, that everyone just started calling me ‘Beauty’ and the name has persisted through the years. I’m afraid neither you nor I can escape my appearance, even if we wished to.”

His fears were beginning to be solidified, of course she was known for her beauty, what was his mother thinking?

At his silence, she grew serious again. Did he think her vain?

“Monsieur?” Her eyes roamed the screen.

“And what would you prefer *I* called you?” He didn’t want to presume to use a name likely given affectionately by friends and family, but he also didn’t want to call her something that she wouldn’t respond to.

Léa was silent for a moment. She was struck by his consideration to her preference. Of course, she’d always been called ‘Beauty’ and that was what she was accustomed to, but it brought her no joy to be seen for that alone. Could she be known for something more in this house, with a man she did not know and could not see? One who seemed to dislike her appearance, or at the very least, was indifferent to it. The villagers called him a beast. *Beauty and the Beast*, she thought, *If all they see is my beauty, could there be something they are missing in the beast as well?* Finally, she looked straight at the partition and said, “I would like for you to use my

given name.” Though he wasn’t pushing for the information, she felt compelled to explain anyway, it is always easier to speak one’s heart and mind when not face to face with a person. “Though I have not been called by that name for many years, I should like to be known for who I am, rather than how others perceive me.”

Audric stared back at her then, surprised by her words. He touched his face and for a brief moment thought that he should come out then and there to show her who he truly was. But, then again, what he looked like was not all there was to him either.

The main door opened, dispelling the moment, and several servants brought in trays of food, setting each one down before Léa on the table. A few branched off and brought trays of food through the partition door, taking care not to let their master be seen.

After they left, Léa tried to lean in to take a sip of her soup and immediately sat back up again. *Curious*, Audric thought, *did she spill something on herself?* She took a moment and adjusted herself and leaned in again, only to sit straight up again. Setting the spoon down, she glanced tentatively at the screen. She seemed quite uncomfortable, but why? Audric observed her rigid posture and adjustments to her gown.

“Are you uncomfortable, Léa? Is it your dress?”

At the sudden rosiness of her cheeks, he realized he’d said the wrong thing.

“Please forgive me, Mademoiselle,” he cleared his throat, “I should not have presumed, that is, I should not have made such an inappropriate comment. I’m terribly sorry.” He sat back in his chair and blew out his air, covering his face with his hand.

Léa was heartily embarrassed. The tightness of the dress was preventing her from leaning forward sufficiently to eat her soup, and now she was mortified that he had noticed. She took a breath and made a decision, it wouldn’t do to let this ruin the evening. Madame Villeneuve said he wasn’t comfortable in social situations, why make them both embarrassed?

“It is,” she answered kindly, “I’m afraid they didn’t know my measurements when they bought this dress. It is beautiful, but I’m afraid I’m not used to such fine things and can’t help but fidget.” She sent a good-natured smile in his direction.

He lowered his hand and looked up slowly. Perhaps he'd misjudged her haughtiness.

Hoping he wouldn't overstep propriety, he tried again, "I hope I won't cause offense...again...but I'm sure anything you've brought from home would be suitable."

Léa smiled, how different he was from his mother. "Thank you, I appreciate your concern," she tried to put as much sincerity in the statement as possible, "I'm afraid I might cause offense to your mother in such—common—attire." She hurried to add, "Marguerite assures me that I will be fitted tomorrow and new dresses commissioned that should be better suited to me."

Audric didn't know what to say now and she couldn't see him nod his acknowledgement, so the room descended in quiet. Léa studied the partition, thought for a moment, then pushed aside her soup bowl in favor of a salad. Perhaps it would be easier to get to her mouth. After several more minutes of silence, she ventured, "Monsieur, are you still there?"

"Yes." He didn't offer more.

Was he watching her eat?

"Are you eating as well?"

"Yes, the venison is especially good; have you tried it?"

She looked down at her salad, perhaps he couldn't see everything.

"Not yet."

She moved her salad out of the way pulling the next course toward her and took a bite of the venison. "It is good," she smiled then continued to chew.

Audric thought his mother must have given the servants instructions to stay away as much as possible, they would normally be the ones to usher in each course, but there seemed to be a mountain of dishes set before her. He would have to speak to them about that. At least with them bringing each course, there would be something to break up the silence. He was at a complete loss for conversation. Should he ask about her family? He didn't know what business his mother had had with her father, so that could be risky.

Léa took another bite then set down her fork. She found she didn't have much of an appetite. After wiping her mouth with her serviette, she

nervously fiddled with the utensils by her plate. She took a sip of her drink and set it down again.

“Léa, you may leave when you’re ready.”

“Yes, thank you,” she stood up quickly, scraping her chair back as she did.

“I didn’t mean that you had to leave right now, just that you could when you were ready.” He had hoped she wouldn’t be quite so eager to leave.

“Oh, yes, I’m ready now, Monsieur. That is, I’m afraid I don’t have much of an appetite just now.”

“Of course.” His chair scraped back as he stood up as well, force of habit he supposed. His mother taught him proper etiquette even though he had no need of it. If only she had taught him how to carry on a conversation.

“Oh, and Léa?”

“Yes?”

“You may call me Audric. Though some have called me Beast since childhood, I wouldn’t recommend using the name around my mother as she’d be likely to turn into one.”

Léa’s eyes went wide.

“It was meant in jest, forgive me,” he laughed nervously.

Léa lowered her head and laughed pleasantly. “I wish you a pleasant evening, Audric.”

He liked the sound of his name coming from her lips. “And you as well, Léa.”



Later that night, after Marguerite had assisted her out of the horrid gown, Léa slipped on her everyday dress and headed in the direction of the kitchen. She hadn’t eaten more than a few bites at supper and had only picked at her lunch, but now hunger gnawed at her stomach. The bell pull stood silent on her wall. It was late and she didn’t want to disturb anyone. Besides, she had grown accustomed to making do for herself and it felt strange to ask someone to do things for her.

She stepped into the quiet hall and tentatively looked up the stairs; no one seemed to be around. Making her way to the entryway, she turned to where Madame Villeneuve had indicated the kitchen would be and pushed the door open partway to peer in. Inside were several servants, some sitting and lounging, others standing. The men were in the middle of a card game, while the women were chatting. When they heard the door open and saw her peek her head in, there was a mad scramble as everyone stood up and turned to her, ready to serve.

She was caught. Stepping in sheepishly, she immediately apologized for interrupting their time off.

A stout woman in her mid-fifties stepped toward her, “We don’t mind at all, Mademoiselle, but why didn’t you just ring for us?”

“I’m afraid I’m used to serving myself and didn’t want to disturb you all.” She smiled warmly at everyone. “Please go on with your game, I’ve really just come for a light snack.”

The woman who spoke before, being the head cook, told her, “Of course, Mademoiselle! I noticed you didn’t eat much of my cooking. If Villeneuve hadn’t told us how nervous you were, I might have been offended.” She laughed merrily. “Now what suits your fancy tonight?”

“Oh, a little bread and cheese will do just fine. Maybe some fruit as well.”

“Have a seat, my love, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you so much,” Léa found a seat at the table where the women had been sitting. Everyone took their seats again but kept their eyes on her. She glanced around at them and smiled again. She studied her hands, thinking maybe this was a bad idea after all.

“Are you from the village?” one of the ladies next to her finally asked.

“Yes, I was born in Paris, but my father recently moved us to the Alps.”

They exchanged glances, then turned back to her. “Do you miss it? Paris, I mean,” the woman continued.

“Not very much. I love the solitude of our cottage near the woods, but I do miss when my sisters were happier and things were more... settled.”

The men turned back to their game but didn't speak. "My name's Francine," the woman introduced herself. "You'll have plenty of solitude here, so I'm sure you'll soon feel right at home." She smiled confidently.

"Francine!" another woman kicked her under the table and shook her head. Then she turned to Léa, "What's your name, dear?"

"Léa Du Bois, it's nice to meet you all." It felt good to start fresh with people who didn't know her as Beauty.

"And we're all thrilled to have you here, Léa," the cook chimed in as she set some wine and a plate full of cold chicken, cheese, baguette slices, and grapes before her and took a seat. "How did you find the master this evening?" she asked. Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned to hear her answer.

Léa choked on a bite of food. Taking a sip of wine, she cleared her throat. "Um..." She shrugged one shoulder and reached for something to report to them. "He was...quiet, polite, or tried to be." Everyone snickered and glanced at each other. "And he was funny."

Cook tilted her head and said with meaning, "Well, well," and folded her hands on the table.

Léa smiled uncertainly, then went back to eating her food. They chatted some more, mostly about her and her family. By the end of her late night meal, she had a smile on her face and several new friendships. Even though she still felt a twinge of sadness when thinking about her family, she went to bed feeling hopeful about what the future held for her here.

Chapter 8

Audric rose early the next morning, as was his custom, only this morning he didn't go directly to his garden cottage. He knew his mother would want a report of the evening before, having not had their usual after-supper time together, but there was someone else he wanted to talk to about it first. Heading to the main entryway, it didn't take long to find the steady Devereux. The man had become Audric's confidante since his father's death.

"Good morning, Audric. What can I do for you?" the manservant asked cheerily. Devereux was one of the few servants that called him by name.

"Are you busy? I was hoping we could talk."

"Not too busy for you, my boy. Is a certain young lady on your mind today?"

Audric ran a hand through the hair on the top of his head and sighed, "I think I may have botched the whole thing, Devereux."

"Why, I'm certain that can't be the case after one evening."

"I asked her about her dress." He shook his head in embarrassed remembrance.

"You mean you told her how lovely she was, that's not..."

"No, I asked if she was uncomfortable in her dress."

"Ah..."

"I did tell her she was beautiful."

"Well, that's something."

"But, even that wasn't executed well as she asked me afterwards if I was displeased by it."

Devereux scratched the side of his face. "And were you displeased that she is beautiful?"

"Yes, at first," he scrunched his eyes closed, "I mean, no, she truly is beautiful, and I'm not disappointed in finding her so, except in the fact that I fear she could never be happy with me after surely having her choice of men before now. Did you know they call her Beauty?"

“I see.”

“I did make her laugh though. I made a joke about Mother.”

The butler started to chortle then turned it into a cough.

“I don’t think she was laughing *at* me,” he lowered his head in contemplation, then looked up at Devereux. “You have to advise me, Devereux, I’m at a complete loss.”

He put his hands on the younger man’s shoulders and assured him, “Now just take it slow, boy. First impressions are always a little... uncomfortable...even under the best of circumstances.”

“Yes,” he broke away and walked a few paces, then came back. “But what should I say to her? What is there to converse about?”

“Ask her about her interests, what her favorite pastimes are. If she asks back, then you can tell her about your love of gardens or books and that may perhaps give you some common ground to work with.”

“And if there is no common ground?”

“Then it will be a quiet marriage,” he teased.

“That’s another thing. How can I marry her if she hasn’t seen me? Will she still want to marry me once she does see me? Will she hate me once she knows and think that I’d tricked her into it, like Leah and Jacob in the Bible...Leah and Léa! Oh, Devereux!”

He sat heavily into a nearby chair and put his head in his hands. Then he turned his head up and continued, “but if she continues to live in my house and we do not marry, it would be wrong, wouldn’t it? For her sake at least.”

“Don’t fret, master, you’ll work it out. Give it some time and you’ll know when it’s right to show her who you are. As far as marrying the girl, why don’t you bring it to her and see how she feels about it? In the meantime, try bringing it before the God of Jacob, he has far more wisdom than I.”

Audric laughed weakly, “You’re just trying to get rid of me, aren’t you?”

“Not exactly...but yes!”

When Audric reached the garden cottage, he noticed the door was slightly ajar. His mother was wasting no time. Taking a deep breath, he went inside.

“Good morning, Mother,” he said as he kissed her on each cheek. She held him at arm’s length and studied his face. He looked away first.

“Well...How did it go?”

“As well as can be expected, I’m sure.” He went to his desk and took out several slips of paper and uncapped his inkwell.

“Is that all? Don’t ignore me; tell me about it.”

He turned and put an elbow on the back of the chair.

“I put my foot in my mouth and didn’t have anything left to say.”

“And how did she respond?”

“Well, I...she was very kind about it all.” It hadn’t occurred to him before now that she had been remarkably gentle about his blunders, when in fact she would have been well within her rights to be upset with him.

“Does she please you, Son?”

He stood up and turned to the window, setting his forearm against it as he stared straight ahead. “I hardly know her, Mother,” he said softly. “She’s beautiful and kind. Based on first impressions, what’s not to like? The real question is, will she be pleased with me? Will time make her more or less likely to grow accustomed to me?”

He turned to face his mother, who stood by the cold fireplace. A look of confusion came over her at his musings; to her it was all quite simple.

“Audric, strangers have married from time immemorial. As long as she knows her place, I’m sure you will get along just fine.”

He stared blankly at her, his heart twisting at the thought of his bride merely tolerating him out of obligation, and at his own mother’s lack of heart.

“And what of love? Or at the very least, mutual respect?”

“Of course anything less than respect will not be tolerated, I’ve made sure of that. I’m afraid, my son, that love is more for poetry than for life. If love does exist between two people, it is very short lived.”

At his bewildered look, she added, “I’m sorry to say so, my dear, I know poetry is all you have to go on, but I’d be remiss to let you go on hoping for something that may never happen. You’ll be happier for it to accept what you’ve been given and try to take what comfort you can from the girl’s presence.”

“But...you mean to say there was no love between you and Father, even after you’d gotten to know one another better?”

“Oh, Audric, you’re so sentimentally minded.” She approached him and placed a hand on his cheek. “After you were born your father and I came to what could be called a mutual understanding, a shared purpose. I wouldn’t say we had an affectionate relationship, but it was comfortable, and neither of us were concerned with more.”

Perhaps, after all, you simply don’t know what love is, Mother. Shaking off the thought, he turned to another matter, “Mother, I would prefer it if the servants didn’t stay away during the meal. It is highly improper, is it not, to make a guest serve her own meal?”

“She’s no guest,” her voice had an edge to it.

“What does that mean?”

She softened her tone, “Only that she will soon be your wife, not a guest.”

“Yes, and even the family does not serve themselves.”

“Very well,” she conceded, “I will inform Villeneuve.”

“Thank you.”

“You know, this cottage is quite drab,” she surveyed the room distastefully, “Perhaps I shall speak with Villeneuve about making it over.”

“You know, Mother, I think I’m going to take a walk now. I’m sure you have something to attend to at the house?” He ushered her to the door.

“Very well, my dear, I shan’t bother you any longer. Have a pleasant walk.” She kissed him and returned to the house.

He let out his air and scratched the back of his head. Looking around for his hat, he put it on, then stepped out into the garden. The perimeter of the garden was quite long and Audric enjoyed walking it in all kinds of weather. He needed to clear his head, he needed the silence, he needed to have a talk with one more person. Following the path, he weaved past the flowers, noticing the colorful butterflies that flitted over them, and the sunlight that filtered through the trees. He came to the grass that lined the perimeter of the hedge and began to walk at a leisurely pace. He turned his head up to the clear blue sky, “God, the beauty of your creation never ceases to amaze me, you are a true artist.” He smiled and walked on. “My mind is troubled and I don’t know what to do. Of course you know it all, will you give me your wisdom? Let me not hurt this dear woman

whose path I find entangled with my own, and if it's not too much to ask, that she not hurt me either." A touch of love entwined with peace swelled deep within him, stopping him short. He put a hand to his chest and breathed it in. Vulnerable tears sprang unbidden to his eyes, falling down to wet the hair on his face.



Léa stood on a stool with her arms out as a maid took her measurements. She tried to select styles and fabrics that weren't too ornate but that were still nice enough to suit the Duchesse. When that was finished mid-morning, she was left to her own devices. The Duchesse told her she could roam the grounds but didn't give her much direction on what she could do. Should she snoop in all the rooms on her floor? That felt wrong. Should she shadow the servants? Again, she didn't want to be in the way. So, she decided to take one of her books and her chocolates from Madame Beaumont and find a shady spot in the gardens to read.

Around lunchtime she noticed Francine taking a tray of food in the direction of the far-off hedged garden. When the maid saw her, she exclaimed, "Oh, Mademoiselle! There you are! Marguerite brought a tray of food to your room, shall I tell her to bring it here?"

"Yes, please. Thank you Francine. Is that for Monsieur Rousseau?"

"Yes," she smiled, "he always takes his midday meal in the hedged garden." She curtsied and continued with her task.

Léa watched her go, curious about the special garden, curious about the man.

That evening proceeded much as it had the evening before, though Marguerite came to assist her into the more comfortable dress that Madame Beaumont had given her this time. She whispered that the Monsieur had requested it, but that the Duchesse was not to know. Léa laughed guiltily and Marguerite joined in as well.

As Léa was escorted into the dining room, Audric noticed she was much more relaxed, and in a way even more beautiful than before.

"Good evening, Audric," she called as she seated herself.

“Good evening, Léa,” he returned, smiling to himself that she decided to speak first. “You look lovely,” and he meant it this time. “If you don’t mind my saying so,” he was quick to add. No blunders tonight!

“From you, I will accept it,” she answered congenially.

He quirked his head, “You don’t like to hear it from others?”

“It depends, really. When my father says it, he means it affectionately. When my sisters and the women in the village say it, it is with bitterness or jealousy, and when Olivier says it...hm...nevermind.”

He wondered if he should ask who Olivier was. Did she have a suitor before she came here? He decided on a different tack and proceeded with caution, “And what do you hear when I say it?”

“I hear that you truly mean it. That no more and no less, you find me lovely. And I appreciate that.”

Silence began to fill the room again, so Audric tried to quickly fill it, “Do you miss your family?” Then immediately regretted going to the one topic he had already decided was dangerous territory.

Her eyes moved to her lap, a frown forming on her face, “Yes. It has only been two days, though, so mostly I fear that they are worrying about me.”

“I’m sorry.” He knew it was on account of him that they would worry, and he wished there was something he could do. Communication with the outside world was one area that he couldn’t cross his mother in, but he hoped he could make her see reason and at least send some word to Léa’s family.

Léa looked up at the partition and searched it.

The dining room doors opened, diverting their attention. The servants brought in the first course, but nothing more. Two servants, one being Francine, stayed behind and took their positions against the wall, ready to attend them.

Audric took this opportunity to introduce a new topic, “Did you have a good day, Léa? Did you have everything you needed?”

“I was very comfortable, thank you. I did wonder though, your mother told me I was free to roam the grounds as I wish, with obvious restrictions of course, but I wasn’t sure if there was anything notable in the other rooms on my side of the house. A sitting room or library perhaps.”

She didn't want to sound impertinent, but as much as she loved her two books, she couldn't imagine having only them to read day in and day out.

"There is a sitting room near the main entryway; Devereux can show you. The rooms on your floor are all guest rooms, I'm afraid, but you may use them as you wish. The library is in between the wings on the second floor."

Drat, she thought, no chance there.

Audric thought about it, then realized why she was asking, "Do you not have enough to do? Of course. What are your interests, do you have any pastimes?"

"Well, I do like to read. I have two books with me."

"Only two? My word, that's not enough. What else? Do you enjoy art or drawing?"

"I'm afraid I haven't done much since I was a child, but I remember enjoying it at the time."

"What about music, do you play an instrument?"

"Mm, the harpsichord. I haven't had the pleasure of playing one since we lived in Paris."

He smiled at that, but wanted to continue the conversation before he said more.

"Hmm, surely there's something else."

"Please don't go to too much trouble, I'm sure I'll manage."

Silence followed.

"Audric?"

"Hm, yes?"

"You're still thinking about it, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I'm not very good at letting things go once I've started thinking about them."

Francine refilled her glass while the manservant went into the small room to do the same for Audric.

"What about your pastimes, Audric? I understand you enjoy the gardens a great deal."

Audric was relieved to hear her ask that, Devereux's words of advice hit their mark. "Yes, I'm very fond of nature and the philosophy of gardening. I'm also fond of reading, and study a great deal. I write as well."

“What do you study, besides gardening? What sorts of things do you write?”

“I study everything,” he laughed, “mostly the work of the *philosophes* in the areas of mathematics, astronomy, and botany.” He paused. “I collect things I’ve worked on and information I want to remember by writing them down, but some of what I write about is personal.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Oh, no, don’t apologize. No one reads what I write because there’s been no one I’ve had to share it with; no one that would care to hear the musings of my heart, anyway.” He chuckled.

“Did you have a tutor to teach you?” she asked as she took another bite.

“No, my father taught me much of what I know, having been educated himself as a nobleman, but he passed unexpectedly several years ago.”

“I’m sorry, that must have been difficult.”

“Indeed, he was more than a teacher, or even a father, he was a companion as well. I credit him with my love of learning. Were you educated, Léa?”

“Yes, Father was particular about educating his daughters as well as his sons, though I’m afraid I didn’t have the pleasure of studying the *philosophes* and sciences in depth. Perhaps you could teach me more?”

“Certainly, if you wish.”

The main course was eaten in silence. By the end of dessert, Audric cleared his throat, “Léa, before you go, I would like to speak to you about something of a personal nature.”

“Very well.” Léa was now as nervous to hear what this matter was as he was to ask about it.

“Édouard, Francine, you may go.”

“Yes, Monsieur.” They bowed and left the room.

“I...,” he began tentatively, “wish to discuss the details of...our wedding.” His mouth suddenly felt very dry and he quickly took a drink of water.

Léa held her breath, she’d hoped and feared that he would bring that up. Now that he had, her nerves were taking over.

“I just wanted to know,” he continued, “whether you thought it should take place right away, or if perhaps we should wait until...until you knew more about me.”

Searching the screen for a long moment, she finally said, “If you had asked me when I first arrived, I would have said right away, but now, I’m unsure. Won’t you at least tell me why you hide?”

Audric's heartbeat thundered in his ears. “I don’t think I can...not yet,” his words came out choked.

Léa thought of Madame Beaumont’s story about the young prince. She pushed up from her chair and approached the partition. Audric panicked and stumbled from his chair, causing it to clatter to the floor, and bumped the table in the process thereby knocking over the candle and extinguishing it. He pressed as far against the back wall as he could. Léa hesitated when she heard the clatter, then moved forward and placed a hand on the partition. All she could see was a vague shadow, the outline of a man.

“Don’t be afraid, Audric, I cannot see you. I just want you to know that whatever you are—whatever you look like,” she corrected, “that I hope you will come to see I’m not like those in the village who tell stories about you. I will not hurt or fear you.” She slowly lowered her hand. “I’ve given my word to marry you, so whether it is now or later, I will leave the decision to you.” She listened for a moment, then added, “Goodnight, Audric.”

As the dining room door closed behind her, Audric opened the door to the makeshift room and stared after her, hoping against hope that her words were true.

Chapter 9

The next morning as Léa sat in bed enjoying the sumptuous breakfast that Marguerite had brought to her, she heard a thump outside her door. Setting down her croissant, she stepped out of bed and opened the door a crack. In front of her door was a small trunk. She bent down and pulled it into her room, took a quick glance down the hall, and, not seeing anyone, closed her door again. Kneeling down in front of the trunk, she carefully lifted the lid. On the very top was a vibrant pink rose and a note that read, *Just a few things to pass the time*. She examined the contents and found paper, drawing pencils, ink and pen, several books, embroidery supplies, and a small wooden box. She picked up the intricately etched, red mahogany box. As she opened it, a delightful melody began as a tiny man and woman went around in a figure eight then came together to dance before doing it all again. It was a music box! Her father used to bring ones like it home to her and her sisters. She giggled girlishly remembering how delighted she had been by them, and still was, then tucked the box back into the trunk.

The stack of books was next as she scooped them up and plopped back into bed to look them over. Included were Perrault's book of fairy tales, a notebook of intricate pencil drawings, a book of prayers and psalms, *Tristan* of Thomas d'Angleterre, the *Chanson de Roland*, and a book of flowers and their meanings. She immediately picked up the book of flowers and flipped through until she found the pink rose, and read, "The pink rose indicates grace and gentleness; an appreciation for the company of another; innocent affection that has not fully bloomed." She smiled. The rose was still by the trunk, so she stepped out of bed again, picked it up and placed it in the glass of water that sat by her bed.



Lambert and Villeneuve rumbled down the road in a wagon loaded with several chests. The Duchesse had kept her word to compensate Léa's

family, encouraged by her son to be generous. Audric had asked Villeneuve to ride along to let the family know that Léa was well. Apparently he thought it would sound more convincing coming from a woman, rather than the austere Lambert.

As they arrived at the humble cottage, they found that no one was home except the two sisters. The younger of the two ushered Villeneuve into the sitting room while Lambert waited with the cart. The girl stood leaning against the wall staring daggers at her. The older sister came back with a cup of tea that tasted stale, like it had been reheated from the day before. Villeneuve took another sip to be polite, then set it down.

“Will your father be back soon, do you think?” she asked the younger girl.

Marie shrugged, “He’s gone to collect firewood.”

“Hm, it’s important I speak to him; does he usually stray far into the woods?”

“Not anymore,” she sniffed.

“Yes, I see. It’s been ages since I had a walk through the forest, perhaps I’ll just go search for him.”

“Suit yourself.”

Villeneuve went out to Lambert to explain, then ventured into the nearby woods. It wasn’t long before she saw several bundles of firewood and kindling wrapped in twine and sitting in a pile.

“Monsieur Du Bois? Are you nearby?” she called out.

A startled Du Bois dropped his armload of branches and stepped from behind the tree that hid him from her view.

“May I help you, Madame?”

“*Bonjour*, Monsieur Du Bois, my name is Madame Villeneuve, I am housekeeper to the Rousseau family.”

He stepped forward anxiously, “How is my daughter? Why have you come?”

She was quick to reassure him, “She is well, you need not fear. Monsieur Rousseau requested that I come personally to assure you of her welfare and to deliver the promised compensation.”

“Compensation? Well,” he looked around not sure how to proceed, then continued, “why don’t I fetch my sons and you can tell us all together how Beauty does. Have my daughters received you?”

“Yes, they have, but I’m afraid we cannot tarry, so I thought it would be best to come find you.”

“Ah, very good. Well, if you will be so kind as to wait at the house, I will be sure to return quickly.”

“Thank you, Monsieur,” she bowed her head then returned the way she had come.

Du Bois moved as quickly as possible to the fields to find the boys. Thankfully, he found all three there today and hurried them back to the house. The woman was found in the sitting room as promised. The boys were sweaty and dirty from labor. They didn’t sit but surrounded the small sitting area. If Villeneuve hadn’t known Lambert was outside waiting, she might have been rather intimidated. Du Bois’ movements were nervous and uncertain until he finally decided to sit in the chair across from the housekeeper.

“I apologize for the state of my sons, they have been laboring in the fields today,” he explained.

“No need to apologize, Monsieur Du Bois, I understand.” Her steady voice seemed to calm the uncertainty that hung in the air.

“Please, tell us about Beauty.” He wanted to get straight to the point.

Villeneuve hadn’t known about Léa’s nickname, but she quickly caught on. “She has settled in quickly and is in good health. The staff all love her already and she seems to be fond of them. We have found her to be a kind and gracious young lady, as I’m sure you know. I cannot speak to her emotional well-being, but from outward appearances, she is holding up remarkably well.”

All the children glanced at each other, some were relieved and some cynical.

“That is good to hear, Madame, thank you for relaying such hopeful information,” Du Bois was positive, eager to believe his daughter wasn’t suffering.

“And how is she treated by Monsieur Rousseau?” Marie spoke with a distinct flavor of bitterness in her voice.

Villeneuve considered the girl and smiled on her with sympathy and understanding. “I have never known my master to be unkind to anyone, and I can assure you he regards your sister with a great deal of

respect.” She turned her attention back to Du Bois, “Now, I have been commissioned to deliver to you the promised compensation that my mistress spoke to you about. If you’ll step outside with me, Lambert will help you bring it inside.”

Their eyes widened with questioning and curiosity, they didn’t know what to expect from someone as cold and harsh as Duchesse d’Aramitz. As they made their way outside, they noted the trunks in the cart. Lambert wasted no time in pulling one off the back of the wagon and taking it inside. Then Pierre, François, and Jacques snapped to attention and each grabbed a trunk as well. They were heavy, and they wondered what on earth was in them. Two more trips were needed to bring the bounty in, overfilling the sitting room with untold treasure.

Lambert helped Villeneuve back into the wagon before jumping up into his own seat. Villeneuve leaned over to speak to Du Bois below. “Shall I bring a message back to your daughter, Monsieur?”

“Just tell her we think of her every day and are happy to hear she is settling into her new home with ease. Oh, and tell her I’ve decided rabbit hunting isn’t for me and have instead turned to collecting firewood to sell.”

“I will relay the message, Monsieur, though I have a suspicion you will have another change of profession soon.” She gave him a knowing smile and Lambert snapped the reins, turning the wagon around and riding down the road they came from.

The family watched them go for a moment then everyone moved at once, stumbling over each other to get inside and discover what was in those chests. Each one claimed a trunk to open. To their awe and delight, several were filled with gold coins. Gazing at each other in astonishment, they rushed to open the others as well. Some had fine cloth for dresses in them, others had fine teas and other delicacies.

“There’s enough merchandise here I could buy a cart and become a traveling merchant!” Du Bois leaned against the wall and slid heavily onto the floor, putting a hand to his forehead.

Juliette held up a gilded hand mirror, “Oh, Father, is that all you think about? We’re not selling all of it, I’m keeping this. Oh, and that cloth! We’re rich again, we’re rich again!” she squealed and bounced on her heels in excitement.

Even Marie's face softened and a small smile quirked one side of her mouth. Pierre looked hopeful and François looked greedy. Jacques sat in awe and said a silent prayer, hoping that the housekeeper had been honest with them and that Beauty was as happy as they were in this moment.



Marguerite led Léa up the stairs to the Duchesse's sitting room, where the lady sat tall doing needlepoint. Upon Léa's entrance she set it down and motioned for her to be seated.

"I brought you here to inform you that I have kept my word, amply so I may add, by delivering your family's compensation. I'm sure you will be happy to know that they should do well for many years to come if they are wise with it."

Léa started to express her gratitude, when the Duchesse lifted her hand to stop her.

"You have my son to thank for the generosity of the gift, you may thank him."

"I will be sure to do so, Madame." She couldn't keep the smile from her face. No matter what else happened at this point, she was happy to know her family was well provided for.

"You're dismissed," the Duchesse said abruptly as she picked her frame back up and continued stitching.

Léa could barely contain her happiness as she practically skipped down the stairs. Madame Villeneuve met her halfway down.

"Hello, Léa, you look to be in good spirits," she noticed.

"Oh, Madame," she grasped the woman's forearms, "it's my family, they won't have to struggle any longer, Monsieur has taken care of them."

Villeneuve smiled, "I have just come from them. Shall we go to the sitting room downstairs so I can tell you all about it?"

"Yes," she beamed, "I would love to."

Villeneuve rang for tea, she needed a good cup after the drive she'd been served earlier. After giving her instructions to the kitchen

maid, she turned to Léa as they both settled on the settee. Léa lifted her brows in expectation.

“Your family by all accounts seemed to be doing well, though I’m sure they were doing much better a few moments after Lambert and I made our exit,” she laughed. Hers was a delightful, motherly laugh. “Your father told me to tell you that they think of you every day. I told them that you appeared to be well in body and spirit, and he was happy to hear it, I believe it relieved his mind a great deal to know.”

“Thank you, Madame,” she took her hand in her own, “I can’t tell you what it means to me to know that they will be taken care of, but also that they know that I am not suffering. I’m sure they were worried for me.”

“I’m happy to have delivered the message. If you don’t mind my saying so, I believe someone else was worried for you as well. Monsieur asked me to accompany Lambert for the sole purpose that I would give your family a report of how you do.”

Léa grew contemplative, turning her head to stare at the fireplace. Villeneuve put a finger to Léa’s chin and drew her face toward her again. “And how are you, truly, my dear? I knew you were well in body, but I couldn’t say with certainty that you were equally well in spirit.”

“I am...” she thought for a moment, “content here, I think. I am no longer afraid and don’t believe I have anything to fear in being here. This day has led me to believe that Monsieur Rousseau is a far kinder and more thoughtful man than I would have guessed him to be.”

The tea was brought in, temporarily interrupting their discussion. When everything was settled and Villeneuve took a deliciously long sip of the comforting liquid, she answered, “Mm, I’m glad to hear it. And I must say,” she touched the girl’s hand, “that we are all happy to find you equally as patient and gentle with the master, more than we could have hoped for.”

“How long do you think it will be...before I see him?”

“I can’t say for sure. While he has known full acceptance here, he has also known all his life what the outside world thinks of him. He may fear you will respond in kind, and that would break his heart. He is eager to please you, I know. I think he wants to know he can trust you.”

“Is his appearance really so bad?”

“No, not so bad. Just a surprise for those not used to it, I should think. I know you want to know more, and I wish I could tell you so it’s not such a shock, but as I’ve said before, it’s not my secret to tell. It’s nothing to fear, I assure you.”

“Thank you, Madame Villeneuve,” she leaned over and kissed her cheek, “you’re invaluable.”



As Léa entered the dining room that evening, her face was glowing as she gazed in the direction of the partition. Audric was nervous after what had happened the previous evening and about how she would respond to his gift. He noticed she carried two of the books he’d given her and smiled that she clearly was pleased. No one had told him that Villeneuve and his mother had spoken to her about her family.

Léa could hardly wait to sit down before she spoke, “Audric, I’ve waited all day to speak to you, and now it’s come, words don’t seem sufficient. What you’ve done for my family—I can’t thank you enough!” Her eyes began to fill with tears of gratitude.

Audric wasn’t prepared for so much credit coming his way for this particular act. “I have done nothing. How can I possibly replace what your family has lost by no longer enjoying your presence? If anything it was a small way to say ‘thank you’ for giving up such a precious jewel. There is no need to thank me for that.”

Her heart swelled even more, but she did not want to embarrass him further. Instead she tilted her head and asked, “Will you at least allow me to thank you for the gifts you left outside my door this morning?”

He tucked his head and smiled but said nothing.

Léa lifted one of the books and flipped to a particular page. “I wondered if you might have this flower in your garden,” she said, lifting the book up to show him the page.

“I can’t quite make it out...”

“Centa...centa...oh, this won’t do.”

After inspecting the room, she spotted a small table along a wall with a vase and some candles on it. Putting the book down, she went to the table and started taking off the contents. The servants were watching her,

wanting to aid her, but uncertain what her intention was. She turned toward them. “Édouard, would you?” She gestured toward the other end of the table. Édouard approached and saw that she was wanting to lift it. He came around to the opposite end and together they lifted the table, Léa leading the way to the partition, and set the table down in front of it.

“Thank you, Édouard.” The valet bowed and returned to his place beside Francine, casting a glance her way as much as to say, “Well, this is progress.”

Léa went back to the larger dining table, set the books on her chair and carried it awkwardly to the little side table. She picked up the books and planted herself in the chair, “Whew, that’s better,” she laughed. “Now,” she lifted up the book again, “do you know this one?”

Amused, Audric held back a laugh, which of course she could not see. He squinted at the book, then relaxed, “*Centaurea Cyanus*, of course, the Cornflower. Yes, there are some of those beauties in one wild corner of the garden.”

Now that she was closer, she noticed the rich, pleasant baritone of his voice and, for better or worse, began to form a picture in her mind of what he might look like.

“I’ve seen them in the fields but didn’t know what they were called. They’re lovely little things. I didn’t see any in the formal gardens.”

“No,” he laughed softly, “Mother is in charge of the formal gardens and isn’t particularly fond of wild flowers, she says they’re weeds in fine clothes.”

“And you don’t agree?”

“I’m quite fond of them, actually. They may not be considered fine or respectable, but they have a sort of free-spirited beauty and in some instances carry medicinal properties as well.”

“I happen to agree with you, they’re delightful! And I defy anyone who says otherwise.” A stubborn smile came over her that Audric rather liked.

Several weeks passed in this way until a budding friendship formed to the point that they each looked forward to the evening meal rather than dreaded it. When Léa finished with the books she was given, more would appear before her door or on the little table in front of the partition. Her

new dresses were completed, giving her a proper look for the Duchesse, while maintaining her comfort. Léa was content with the situation as it was, but Audric still wrestled something in his mind that he couldn't quite shake.

Chapter 10

Audric met his valet, Édouard, for their usual sparring match. The physical exertion of fencing often helped him clear his thoughts.

They saluted each other with their blades.

“En garde,” Édouard called, *“Êtes-vous prêts?”*

Audric nodded his head, ready.

“Allez!”

Édouard took the offensive. He made a feint attack which Audric parried, feint attack again, and parry. Édouard lunged and Audric stumbled back.

“You’re distracted, Monsieur, where’s your form?”

“Again!”

Édouard thrust and Audric attempted a counterattack, but was too slow, leaving room for a flick from Édouard to his right shoulder. Audric made a frustrated grunt and swiped the air with his blade.

“Ça va, Monsieur?”

He nodded.

“Continue?”

“Non.” Audric ran a hand through his hair. “Édouard? Do you feel affection for your wife?”

“Pardon?”

“Do you...love her?”

“Absolument,” Édouard smiled, but his brows came together and he let out an airy laugh.

“But I mean...hm,” Audric lowered his head in contemplation, then shrugged and said, “I don’t know, never mind.”

“Speak your mind, Monsieur. What are you asking?”

They found a pair of chairs and sat. Édouard was no more than five years older than Audric and they might have been more like brothers had they been raised together. As it was, Édouard was sent to school at a young age and apprenticed shortly after on commission by Duc Rousseau as his

apprenticeship to a surgeon would aid the family upon its completion. The two young men had formed a comradery of sorts over the years, but Audric was after all still his employer.

Audric thought for a moment and shook his head, then continued, “It has come to my attention that my parents felt no love for one another, that in fact they likely shared very little affection, and it was suggested that perhaps I’m something of an idealist to hope for more than a shared existence with my wife. There are different kinds of love to be sure, and I’m grateful for the friendship that seems to be forming between Léa and I, but my understanding of love is so much deeper than that. Even if she never has what might be called romantic love for me, is it really too much to hope that the person I might one day have children with would share some sort of mutual respect, tenderness, and concern for the other’s well-being?”

“Oof, Monsieur, that is a big question. I am not a philosopher, a priest, or a poet that I should advise you.”

“No, but you are married, and I value your opinion.”

“Very well,” Édouard took a deep breath. “Is it too much to ask or hope for? Certainly not. Is it the general way marriages of your rank tend to go, also no.” He shook his head and gave him a pained look. “Perhaps in this the poor have one advantage over the wealthy. After all, we have very little to find comfort in but each other, and the children that inevitably follow.” He chuckled. “Many nobles marry for rank or money, and have many other things to turn to other than each other.”

“So I need to become poor to find love?” Audric gave a wry laugh.

“I wouldn’t advise it, Monsieur. And I would not have you believe that poverty alone makes for a satisfactory marriage, there are plenty of poor unhappy marriages.” Édouard rubbed his chin. “*Que dois-je dire?*” he said vaguely. “You have friendship, good, what is a loving marriage without that at its foundation? But, where does a mutual love come from except by the pair each giving and receiving love? So, let it start with you, Monsieur.”

Audric pondered that, then turned to his valet, “Thank you, Édouard, you give sound advice.” He held out his hand and Édouard clasped it in return.

“Is that all, Monsieur?” He rose from his seat.

“Just one more thing. You’ve been there every evening. Is it time? Time to show her whom she’s agreed to marry. Will she receive me, do you think?”

“That I could not say, and the timing is only for you to decide, but how will she have the chance to accept you unless you give her the opportunity? Love tends to come with a measure of risk, even under usual circumstances. I will be there to lend my support whenever you choose.”

Audric nodded and Édouard left him to think it over.



Léa sat at her little table in the dining room eating while reading a book, as was their custom at times when they didn’t particularly have anything to say. They’d come to that point where not all silences were uncomfortable ones.

Audric observed her for several moments. “Léa,” he said, an unusual seriousness to his voice.

“Hm,” she took a moment to look up from her book, “yes?”

He weighed his words carefully, “Can you tell me...what you have heard...in the village about me?”

“Well,” she took a moment to think, “I hadn’t heard much.” Her mouth twitched and she laughed a little, “I guess just that you were a big hairy beast with fangs and a taste for young children.”

Audric didn’t laugh. The two servants turned to each other anxiously. Léa tilted her head to one side and grew serious when she sensed that he wasn’t teasing her with the question. “But I certainly don’t believe such child’s tales,” she continued. “Why do you ask?” she prodded gently.

“Well,” he gave a self-deprecating laugh, “they’re not completely wrong. I’m not particularly big, about average really. I’ve been assured I’m not a beast. My younger self would have been pleased with fangs, but God didn’t see fit to give me any. And roast child has never been on the menu as far I know,” he paused, “but I am hairy.”

Léa was confused. Was that all? She’d seen Olivier without a shirt on and his chest could rival a poodle for hair. “I’m not sure I understand,” she finally said.

Audric stood and his hand shook as he reached for the handle to the door. He gave a silent plea to God that this would turn out right and tried to swallow past the lump in his throat. When Léa heard the door click open she stood up from the table and took a step to the side, waiting. Her heart sped up and felt like the hoofbeats of stampeding horses. Audric stepped forward from the shadows, but kept his eyes averted.

Gasping softly, her hand shot to her mouth, not because what she saw was so awful but because it was so unexpected, so unnatural at first glance. She lowered her hand and took a moment to take in his form. In body, he was like any other man—of average height and build, as he said. His arms were muscular but lean. The only difference was that his entire face, neck and the backs of his hands were covered in jet black hair. From his brow, his hair swept up and back down to his shoulders. The silky hair grew long on his face, growing even close to his eyes, covering his cheeks, and was neatly trimmed just below the chin. The hair that covered his neck was shorter. Only his ears were bare. He had a well kept and clean appearance and wore a smart-looking suit of clothes—long dark blue coat, crisp white cravat, waistcoat, knee-length breeches and tall leather boots.

Léa couldn't keep her chin from quivering and a small sob from escaping her throat, not because she was frightened but because his whole demeanor was like a small boy waiting for a beating. She could see that he thought he was hideous, and more than that, he was ashamed of himself. His heart was exposed to her and she knew it would shatter if not handled with care.

Audric never lifted his eyes, but when he heard her single sob, he clenched and unclenched his hands, took in a sharp breath and turned away. He groaned as if his very soul would break. Rushing to him, she placed one hand on his arm and another on his shoulder. A gasp escaped him as if her touch hurt him. He turned his head to her slightly and she could see that tears were flooding his eyes.

Turning him to face her, she said, "Audric, won't you look at me? You're breaking my heart." She reached up and ran a hand down his cheek. It was soft and smooth, like down. Closing his eyes briefly, he finally lifted them fully to hers and she smiled up at him, nothing but kindness in her face. Audric let out his breath and smiled back at her. Léa had never seen a man with such striking green eyes, but more than that, they were

like a direct link to his spirit, communicating with more depth than any words could. If there were any fear left in her, if she didn't believe him to be kind and gentle before, she couldn't help but let go of that fear and believe those things now. His eyes shone with the brightness and softness of human compassion and vulnerability. Her feminine heart stirred to comfort him, so she rested her head against his chest and wrapped her arms around his middle. Slowly, he brought his arms up, haltingly at first then closed them around her and breathed her in. In that moment, something shifted inside him—he was hopelessly in love with her.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

As they separated, they turned to find Francine and Édouard close by. Francine was crying and clinging to Édouard. They all smiled at each other and laughed tearfully.

Chapter 11

Audric and Léa sat at the dining table together. Audric still had an air of self-consciousness to him, while Léa watched him compassionately but not sure what to say.

“Do you find me very ugly?” he asked with a half laugh.

“And if I were to say yes, would you throw me out in disgrace?” she teased.

“No, never,” he gave her a piercing look, and she found she had to look away. “It is entirely for you to turn me away,” he almost whispered.

“Well, in that case,” she turned back to him, “no, I don’t find you very ugly, just...unexpected.” She didn’t know what other word to use. “And quite soft,” her eyes twinkled.

He puffed an embarrassed laugh and now it was his turn to look away. As his arm rested on the table, Léa reached over and placed a hand on his. “I’m sure it wasn’t easy to put such trust in a poor village girl you barely know, but I hope you know I would never reveal your secret to anyone.”

Her touch was deliciously cool. “I do now,” his smile was soft. “Léa, my mother is expecting me, it is generally our custom to sit together after dinner. Would you be so good as to join us this evening?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to intrude,” she was uncertain only because Duchesse d’Aramitz would be there, and she still wasn’t sure how the woman felt about her.

“Don’t worry, neither of us are prone to biting,” he laughed, but his eyes were hopeful. “Of course, if you’d rather not, I understand.”

She relaxed and conceded, “It would be my pleasure to join you this evening, Audric.”

Rising, he held out his arm to her. She stood up and hooked her arm through his as they made their way to the Duchesse’s sitting room. Duchesse d’Aramitz spoke before looking up as she set down a book and took off a pair of spectacles, “There you are, I was beginning to wonder—” she stopped at the sight of Léa on her son’s arm and immediately stiffened,

exchanging a tender voice for a more formal one. A look crossed her face that Léa couldn't decipher, she seemed to be struggling with conflicting emotions.

"I've brought a guest this evening, Mother," he was quiet, waiting for a response.

Her brows came together, then she nodded her head, "Offer her a seat, Audric."

He led her to the chair next to his mother's and noticed that they were both uncomfortable. Perhaps music would help to ease the situation. After his charge was seated, he turned to the harpsichord across the room from them.

Léa felt a twinge of panic as Audric left her beside the domineering lady. Then he began to play, quite perfectly, and she found a way to hopefully ease the chill that was emanating from her direction—compliment her son.

"Your son plays beautifully. I didn't know he played the harpsichord," she offered.

The mother turned her head to her, "Yes, Audric does well in everything he sets his hand to learn. I made sure he was instructed in a variety of subjects."

They both turned to watch him and he looked between them uncertainly.

"I daresay, Mademoiselle, that you must think me a very hard woman, bringing you here as I have." She stared ahead as she spoke. Léa turned to her but didn't answer. "There's nothing I wouldn't do for the happiness and welfare of my son. Nothing." She turned to look her square in the face, her intentions quite clear. Léa was very aware that her fate, as well as that of her father, was still very much in this woman's hands.

Léa mustered up as much courage as she could and tried to bring peace to the situation once more, "I understand the need to protect your son, but I do wonder why the situation is quite so dire. Though they may fear him at first, would the villagers not grow accustomed to him once they knew how gentle he is? Once they're no longer made to be afraid." She added pointedly.

"Do you?" The Duchesse's voice grew even more strained, "When Audric was born we brought him to the priest to have him baptized. Do

you know what he said? He told us that Audric was a demon child, cursed by God for the sin of his parents. What the sin was he couldn't tell us but that we should search our souls in anguish, and it would be better if we'd let the child die." She spoke with a bitter chill to her voice, "Instead, I found no interest in a God who would punish such a tiny, innocent thing for something I or his father had unconsciously done." She turned again to Léa, "Oddly enough, Audric is the most spiritual man I've ever known. He claims God speaks to him."

Léa turned to watch Audric. He gave her an innocent smile and she returned it as she considered what the Duchesse had just told her.

The lady continued, "And lest you think the nobility would behave differently, that they would be more educated and less likely to respond with fear and ignorance, let me set the record straight. When Audric was a little older, a friend of the family came to visit unexpectedly. When he saw my son, he asked us if he could buy the boy from us so he could be added to the man's collection of oddities. Audric's father was still alive at the time and was able to brush him off and distract him to other things without the man pursuing the idea further." She paused then continued with force, "So, if your question is, would I risk death for my son from the church and villagers or for him to be a spectacle like some sort of exotic animal among the nobles, my answer will most certainly be no. There is no doubt that the situation is dire enough to keep him hidden and to punish anyone who would venture to risk my son's safety for their own curiosity."

Léa tried to blink away the tears that started to form. They rolled down her cheeks and for Audric's sake she brushed them away quickly.

The piece he was playing ended and he looked between the two women. He felt that their conversation wasn't going well, so he didn't start anything else and came back to join them.

"Excellent, as always," his mother smiled and held out her hand. He took it and kissed it, glancing over at Léa, then sat down across from them on the settee.

"You didn't tell me you played as well, Audric," Léa smiled congenially.

"Ah, well, I wanted to wait to tell you until you could have the opportunity to play too." His smile was shy. "What have you two been

discussing?” He glanced from one to the other, trying to read their expressions.

“You,” Léa offered.

“Ah,” he straightened up, a twinkle in his eyes, “nothing too embarrassing, I hope.”

“We were speaking of your childhood,” his mother tried to be light, but didn’t quite succeed, her face was still frozen in a frown.

Audric told a few stories of his own, all much lighter than the ones his mother told her, full of the typical childlike antics and mischief of small boys. Francine brought in tea and coffee. Léa especially enjoyed the coffee since she’d not had the pleasure of drinking it since her family’s fall from wealth. She told them some stories of her childhood and life as a merchant’s daughter, as well as about her siblings and their little cottage by the woods. This was more for Audric's benefit as he encouraged her to tell them more about herself and seemed genuinely interested. The Duchesse relaxed some but still didn’t engage fully.

As the evening wore on, Léa asked if she might be excused to her room.

“You are not unwell, I hope,” he asked with concern as they both rose.

“No, just a little tired, and a slight headache.”

“May I escort you to your room?”

“Of course,” she gave him a tired smile.

“Audric, I wish you would stay for a moment, there’s something I wish to speak to you about,” his mother interjected.

He took a step toward her and leaned down, “Can it not wait a moment? It won’t take long to escort her back.”

Léa moved to intervene, “It really is no trouble to walk back myself, it’s not far.” She didn’t want to aggravate the woman further.

Audric felt as though his hands were tied. He took Léa’s hand and kissed it lightly. “Goodnight, Léa.” His eyes lifted to hers. Was that a touch of sadness he saw, or was she truly just tired?

Léa curtsied to them both and left the room. After walking a few paces, she moved faster down the stairs. She didn’t think she could hold in her emotions much longer. Making her way to the room, she closed the door and fell into a heap on the floor, sobbing uncontrollably. There was

no need to hold the tears back now, so she let them come. Everything came crashing in on her at once: the lady's threats, the reality of never seeing her father again, the truth of whom she was to marry, and the knowledge of the unfair treatment of that man. It was overwhelming and she didn't have anyone to turn to.



Back in the sitting room, Audric turned to his mother. "That was very rude, Mother. Would it not have been proper for me to escort her back?"

"Audric, please come sit beside me for a moment. Indulge your mother this one time." She reached her hands out to him.

Sighing, he took them and went down on one knee in front of her. Once he was down, she brought her hands up to his face and smoothed the hair on his cheeks. "Perhaps my behavior was a bit unwelcoming, but seeing her there made me fear that I might lose you." Her voice turned maternal again.

"Lose me? Mother, you could never lose me, I'm not going anywhere," his voice was gentle.

"Yes, and what of your heart? I will not be first there for long, I'm afraid."

He lowered his head and let out his breath, his heart flipped at the thought.

"But, that is as it should be," she conceded as she patted his shoulder, "I just wasn't prepared for it tonight."

"I didn't plan it so myself, it just suddenly seemed like the right time."

"Then you were right to do so, and I will simply have to adjust."

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "You'll always have all the love I can ever have for my mother...but, I feel I must make sure Léa is well."

"Of course. You're free to go, I will not keep you longer."

He smiled hopefully at her, and hurried from the room.

As he stood in front of Léa's door to knock, he stopped a moment. Was she crying? He leaned his head closer to the door to listen. Yes, she

was weeping. Lowering his hand, he turned to leave, then stopped and turned back. If her sorrow was because of him, he was probably the last person she would want to see. Then again, if his mother had said something to upset her, should he not try to make it right? He lifted his arm again, then stopped and ran a hand through the hair on the top of his head. Finally, he didn't think about it, he just knocked. Better to be wrong and be turned away, then be right and not be there for her.

The crying stopped suddenly. "It's all right, Marguerite, I'll manage on my own tonight."

"It's...me," he spoke through the door.

Léa thought about turning him away. She was embarrassed by her tears and wasn't sure she wanted to be seen by anyone. Then a thought struck her, he was probably the one person who did understand at least to some extent what she was feeling at that moment. He'd lost his father, he had no friends other than those who worked under him, and he'd felt the full weight of isolation and rejection by the world.

The quiet lingered and Audric thought about leaving, when the bolt clicked back and the door opened. The girl's eyes and cheeks were red and blotchy. She sniffled and rubbed her nose with the back of her hand. Digging in his pocket, he produced a handkerchief. "It's, uh, clean," he said as he offered it to her. She looked at him and laughed, taking the handkerchief. She fingered it, then her face contorted as she began to cry again. Audric took a step closer to her and she leaned her head into his chest. It seemed the natural thing to do to wrap his arm around her, though he wasn't entirely sure it was proper. When she melted into his embrace, he brought his other arm around her and held her close. Propriety seemed less important than comfort in that moment.

After letting her cry for some time, he searched behind him and found a bench along the other side of the wall. He led her to it and they sat down together. She unfolded the handkerchief and wiped her face, then blew her nose.

"I'm afraid my appearance is less than ladylike," she sniffed and blew her nose again.

"Not at all," he said softly, then thought about what he said and quickly tried again, "That is, what I meant was, it doesn't bother me." He winced. "I guess what I should have said was 'think nothing of it,' because

even ladies need to give way to tears at times. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

Léa put a hand on his arm, "Thank you for understanding. And don't give it a thought, I know what you meant the first time."

"So, would you like to talk it over? I'm good at listening. I hope it wasn't something Mother said to you. Or, is it me that has brought you to tears?"

"No," she turned her head down, "and yes, but no."

He moved his finger in the air, "Which one, to which one?" he asked.

She laid her head on his shoulder. The act made Audric's heart flip and propriety was no longer a thought. He took the liberty of wrapping his arm around her and she nestled into him, saying, "No, I don't want to talk it through just now, your mother did say some things, but only the hard truth. And, no, it isn't you."

He breathed a sigh of relief and hugged her tighter, leaning his head on hers. It was as much a comfort to him as it was to her. He'd experienced enough heartache to know that presence is more of a comfort than words at times, so he just let her be without speaking. Eventually, her breathing evened out and Audric realized she had fallen asleep. He smiled and thanked God for such a peaceful end to the day.

When Marguerite came around the corner some time later, she stopped upon seeing them and started to back away slowly. She was surprised but pleased by the sight and didn't want to disturb them. Before she went far, Audric whispered to her, "Wait, Marguerite." Shifting the sleeping Léa, he took her in his arms and carried her to the boudoir, where Marguerite turned down the covers and he laid her gently on the bed. They made their exit, quietly shutting the door behind them.

Chapter 12

L éa woke to the sound of Marguerite bringing in her breakfast. She sat up stiffly. Female attire didn't lend itself well to sleeping in. Though she had slept soundly. After swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she went over to the vanity and glanced in the mirror, then she glanced again. "Oh, dear," she sighed at the sight of her hair half pinned, half loose strands popping out all over the place. Her face was still a little splotchy and her eyes puffy. "Perhaps today would be a good day for a bath, Marguerite."

After the necessary preparations were made and the tub was steaming and ready, Léa soaked away the stiffness, the grogginess, and the effects of her emotions from the night before. As every muscle relaxed, everything from the evening before came flooding back to her. She finally had a face to attach to the voice she'd come to know so well over the past two months. It wasn't at all what she'd envisioned. The faces of the men she'd known throughout her life played through her mind, those she considered handsome and others that held no attraction to her. Could she love Audric in the way that she needed to? Would she find him attractive someday?

She hadn't lied to him exactly, she wasn't disgusted or frightened by his appearance, but neither was she drawn to him in the way he no doubt would like her to be. But he was so dear to her at the same time; he had become a friend. His thoughtfulness, care, and concern for her was endearing and she valued their friendship and discussions. Had she not longed for someone just like that before she'd come here? The safety of his arms around her and the warmth of his embrace was so comforting, enough to put her to sleep. And those eyes. She'd never met a kinder or more intelligent man, and it shone brightly through his eyes.

Once she was clean and clothed and her hair was freshly pinned, Léa decided to take a walk. It was a beautiful early summer day, the sun was bright and the air was fresh. As she made her way to the formal

garden area, she stopped as she noticed a dark head. Audric was sitting on a bench ahead. He was sketching and had his face turned away from her. She had wondered whether he would keep to seeing her at the evening meal or whether he would seek her out more, and here was her answer. It would certainly help the days to pass quicker to have someone to talk to during the day. Coming up quietly behind him, she peeked over his shoulder at his sketch. It was a bluebird.

“How lovely!” she said. The bird in question startled and flew away. “Oh, I’m sorry!” She clasped a hand over her mouth.

Turning to her, he gave her a broad smile, “I was hoping you would come. Don’t worry about the bird, she’ll be back. There’s a nest right up there in that tree.” He pointed and she saw a small bunch of twigs and straw in a high branch. She sat down next to him on the bench.

“You look refreshed this morning, are you feeling better?”

“Much.” She smiled, then grew serious, “I want to thank you for last night. I needed the presence of a friend.”

“Of course, any time,” he returned, then asked, “Are you ready to talk about why you were crying?”

She looked down at the path, “It’s silly, really.”

“Léa, if it made you weep, it’s not silly.”

“It’s just that I miss my father. Something your mother said made me realize...well, I’ll never see him again.”

“That’s not at all silly.”

“I thought you would understand, that’s why I opened the door. Do you...miss your father?”

“Yes,” he looked down, “every day. He was the anchor to our family, a good father, and my only friend.”

“How long has he been gone?” she asked gently.

“Eight years. The following year we decided to send my sister Lisette to live with our aunt. With Father gone and Mother not willing to travel often, we thought it was her best chance to experience life, and marry when she came of age. It was hard on everyone, especially Lisette, she was still so young and to lose a father and be sent away...I can only hope we made the right decision. I just felt so helpless, as her brother to not be able to look after her properly, to have her be just as isolated as I am, it was an impossible situation. I hope she has come to understand.”

“I only wish any one of my brothers showed the same level of concern for me as you have shown to your sister. If she doesn’t know that you acted in love for her now, I’m sure that someday she will. Does she not write?”

“She does, but she keeps it light and doesn’t express her feelings much, to me anyway.” He leaned onto his elbows and looked over at her, “May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why did you choose to come here? Surely you had others who hoped to gain your hand in marriage.”

Léa tried to read his face. *Does he truly not know?* she wondered. Should she tell him all? Would he release her from her obligation and be able to dissuade his mother from continuing with the charges against her father? Fear seized her heart. She couldn’t take the risk, not when they’d come this far. Money had been paid...and she knew his secret.

Her eyes flitted down to her hands as she tried to keep her voice steady, “To give my family a better life...to escape those who would hope to gain my hand, as you say.” She let out a breathy laugh, but it held no mirth.

He lifted his head in concern, “What do you mean escape? Did someone try to hurt you?”

Taking a deep breath, she plunged ahead, “Not exactly, just one man in particular who I know would not take no for an answer. Whom I couldn’t say anything but no to,” she added quietly, looking away out over the gardens.

“Olivier,” he said as if that explained an unanswered question.

“Yes, do you know him?” she quickly turned her head back to him.

“What? No, you, uh, mentioned his name before.”

“Did I?” she tried to remember what she had said.

“Yes, it was some time ago, don’t trouble yourself,” he tried to brush it off. He was embarrassed for having been caught remembering such a detail. “Would you like to walk?” he tried to change the subject, “I’d like to show you something, if you have the time.” Setting his sketchbook and pencil down, he stood up and offered her his arm.

Taking it, she smiled, “My dear Audric, I have nothing but time.”

He led her through the winding paths of the formal gardens until they came to the straight path that led to the hedged garden. Léa hesitated a moment. She couldn't quite get it out of her head that she shouldn't be there.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"No, I don't suppose so," she spoke with uncertainty. "I was just warned not to come here, so it still feels like forbidden ground."

"Well, without me in it, it's just an ordinary garden. I'm the forbidden ground, I think." They laughed together and continued down the path.

About halfway there, he paused and pointed into the distance to their right. "That's where the married servants live," he said, indicating some cottages in the distance. "Father had them built when it was clear that our current servants would be here for some time. It also frees up some space below stairs for those who are unmarried to spread out and be more comfortable."

"Are the unmarried servants not allowed to marry?"

"Mm, they are. They aren't completely blocked off from the outside world, they go to the city regularly and are allowed to visit outside family. Some were married already or found their spouse among the servants here. As long as they are trusted, they can marry from the outside and keep their families in the cottages. Once," he laughed, "I thought perhaps I could persuade Francine to marry me, but it turns out she saw me as nothing more than her master, or at most a little brother. I was heartbroken."

"Really?" she smiled, "And how old were you when you tried to win her heart?"

"Oh, ten, I think."

"A strapping young man, I'm amazed she could refuse!"

"I suppose I can't blame her, she was fifteen at the time. I guess she had no interest in younger men."

They both laughed and continued to the garden. He opened the door for her and she walked into what seemed like a fairy world. Colors exploded everywhere, trees for shade and fruit speckled the landscape, expertly carved marble statues of graceful women and perfect men ornamented the lawn.

“It’s beautiful!” She took a few steps in awe, drinking in the delightful place.

“I’m happy you approve,” he said proudly, “Lambert and I have worked hard to make it a haven.”

“No wonder you can be in here all day,” she turned back toward him. “Show me what you see. Let me see it through your eyes.”

A spark lit in those delightful green eyes. “The thing about plants,” he began, “is that there is such a diversity of purpose while also being so pleasing to the senses. Take *Calendula Officinalis* for instance.” He walked to the side and knelt down by a patch of dainty yellow flowers. Léa did the same. “A humble flower, pretty but not very refined, the yellow adds a brightness to the garden that is hard to resist, but what you don’t see is that it actually has remarkable healing properties. It can be used to fight infection in a wound as well as a number of other uses.”

Standing up, he took her to another section that looked to contain herbs. “Rosemary, thyme, and so many other herbs add flavor to our food and have medicinal uses as well. Valerian has a wild sort of beauty as well as a strong scent, but under the surface, its roots can help to calm you and aid sleep.” He continued walking and Léa followed, delighted by what he was describing as well as the joy he seemed to derive from it all.

“Trees give shade on a hot day and also produce fruit to feed us. Not to mention they’re lots of fun to climb! For little boys, I mean...for children, they’re fun for children to climb.” He cleared his throat.

Smiling, she asked, “Does that mean you don’t climb them anymore? What a pity!”

“In truth it wasn’t so long ago,” he laughed.

“I wish I could climb trees.” It was an offhanded comment, she wasn’t really expecting him to respond.

Audric suddenly had a far-off look in his eyes and he chewed his bottom lip, then he looked her dress up and down.

“Is that the look you make when you’re figuring something out?”

“Huh? Oh,” he chuckled, “I suppose it is. Does the less formal dress you were in before allow for...hm...greater movement?”

“Well,” she laughed, “it does, yes.”

“Hm,” he nodded his head, and was lost to thought again.

She smiled to herself as she walked to a large and deep fountain and sat at its edge. Fish were swimming peacefully beneath the surface. “Do you think a water nymph lives in this fountain?”

“If she does, I certainly don’t have anything to fear from her.”

Léa gave him a questioning look.

Audric explained, “Some believe that water nymphs, drawn to the beauty of men, will pull them down into the watery depths. I don’t think one would find me worth the trouble.”

Instead of responding, she looked away and noticed the cottage. “You have a cottage in your garden! Do you store your tools there?”

Laughing, he took her hand and led her to the little cottage where she peered in a window. “Oh, how cozy! Ah, and another harpsichord!”

“Yes, feel free to play here as often as you wish.”

Leaning down, she smelled the roses that were all around the cottage. Without thinking, she said, “No wonder Father thought I’d enjoy these!”

“I’m sorry?” he asked, confused.

“Oh, nothing, Father just knows I enjoy roses.”

She sat down on a marble bench and leaned her head back, drinking in the sunshine and atmosphere. Audric sat down on the ground and leaned over to rest on his elbow. He plucked a blade of grass and fiddled with it. Léa brought her head down and observed him. Upon looking up, he caught her staring and was suddenly uneasy. He looked down again and asked soberly, “What is it? Do I ruin the scene?”

“No,” she knelt down off the bench and billowed her skirts out before her in the grass, “No, not at all,” she looked steadily into his face. “I was just thinking,” she continued, “as nice as this place is, how have you been able to bear so much solitude? I adore the quiet and peace, but even I would find myself longing for company after so many days alone.”

He slid over on his back and blew the pieces of grass out of his hand. “It’s always there, the loneliness. The ache of it isn’t always as strong, but it never really goes away.”

“How unhappy you must be.” He turned his head to look into her doe eyes. She was like a little mother hen that had found her chick had wandered off and gotten hurt.

“Not as much as you might imagine. Of course, I’ve had some dark days over the years. It was the worst when I was about fifteen, not quite a boy, not quite a man, trying to find my place in the world—realizing more and more that my world was incredibly small. I had no companion, no friend, I was beginning to see that no woman would ever love me—except my mother,” he let out a sardonic breath, “The ache at the core of my being felt like it would squeeze the life out of me.” He glanced over to find her listening attentively. “I cried out for God to just let me die. My parents, my tiny sister, they would all be better off with me gone.” He went back up on his elbow and stared intently up at her. “And that’s when I heard his voice for the first time. He said, ‘My son died so that you could live.’” Noticing that he was losing her a bit, he stood up and found the shears, clipping a rose.

Hunching down in front of her, he continued, “I found something that day, a beauty in the pain, a joy in the loneliness. Many think...well, so I’ve read,” he admitted, “that pain and happiness can’t exist together, that it’s one or the other, but I’ve found that at times the two can walk hand in hand; like the rose.” He handed the freshly clipped rose to her. “Thorns connected to something so delicate and beautiful.”

Holding it gingerly between her fingers, she brought it to her nose, then looked over at him, the light in his eyes was bright as he explained further. “That day I felt a love wash over me that was so deep it made my heart want to burst open. That love has a name, Léa!”

Léa stared into his eyes with a soft smile on her lips.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“They call you a beast, Audric, but I have known men who deserve that title far more than you do. You have a beautiful soul!”

He laughed softly and looked down.

“Don’t laugh, that’s something that few have, even among good men.”

“Yes, well, I lack one thing that a good, ordinary man might have.”

“What is that?”

“The ability to captivate your heart.”

Chapter 13

Marguerite caught up with Francine as she left the house with Monsieur's lunch tray. Francine gave her a questioning look. Marguerite shifted Léa's tray in her arm and explained that Mademoiselle was in the gardens today. As they came to the formal gardens and didn't see her, they wondered where she could be.

"Did she return to her room?" Francine wondered.

"No, for certain, I checked there first." Marguerite responded.

They stared at each other and grew excited.

"You don't think..."

"Surely he wouldn't take her there already."

"Could she be in the sitting room?"

"Devereux didn't mention it."

Then, all at once, they took off toward the hedged garden as fast as they could without upsetting their trays. They stumbled over each other to get through the door. Sure enough, Mademoiselle was sitting on the grass with Monsieur. They gave each other an astonished look, then both began to smile. She must be special if their master brought her to the *sanctum sanctorum*, not even Duchesse d'Aramitz was welcomed to stay there for long.

They tried to approach the pair discreetly. When they came close enough, they noticed that Mademoiselle had a troubled look on her face. Upon seeing them, Audric stood up and Léa sat back on her knees.

"Forgive us, Monsieur, Mademoiselle, we did not mean to intrude," Francine said as she set her tray on the bench. Marguerite followed suit.

"No intrusion, Francine, perfect timing in fact," he glanced at Léa, who tucked her head and looked away as she tried to ignore him. He didn't expect her to be in love with him, but the fact that she didn't attempt to deny that he had no chance told him all he needed to know about how she felt. He didn't blame her, it only confirmed what he thought would be true before she even arrived.

“Is there anything you need, Mademoiselle?” Marguerite asked.

“No,” she stood up and brushed off her skirts, “I think I’m going to return to the house just now.”

Dismayed, Audric took her hand, “Please stay, for a moment at least.” She nodded but kept her eyes down. The two maids quickly curtsied and moved to leave the garden.

“Come with me.” He kept hold of her hand as he led her to a nearby tree that had a pleasant shady spot underneath. “I apologize, I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable just now.”

She studied her hands, “It’s not that, Audric, it’s just...”

“Yes? You can tell me anything, I won’t be angry with you,” he encouraged her.

“I care a great deal for you already, I love our talks every evening and I count you a dear friend, I just don’t know...” She couldn’t continue.

“If you can ever love me,” he finished for her.

She looked up into his eyes, “Yes. That is, when we are married, we’ll be husband and wife, of course. I know what is expected of me, and a certain measure of love could certainly follow. But I find I am not...”

“Attracted to me? Léa, I don’t expect you to be.”

“I’m so sorry. I just don’t want to give you false hope for something that I don’t feel at the moment. I feel horrible for saying it.”

He turned his head down, picked up a stone and flicked it, then rested his arm on his knee. When he spoke it was full of tenderness, “When Mother said she’d found me a wife, I was terrified. How could she—you,” he corrected and smiled, “possibly know what you were getting into. I hardly expected you to be so thoughtful and gentle, that you would call me friend. Of course there’s the hope for more...but I know that may never happen. I just thought that if perhaps we could come to a mutual respect, it might be enough, that staying here with me wouldn’t be...unbearable. As far as ‘what’s expected of you,’ well, I lay no such claim on you. I have hope but no expectations. Can we simply take the path as it comes?”

She nodded her head and smiled in appreciation. “It’s certainly not unbearable to be with you, Audric, I do enjoy your company,” she added, dearly wishing in that moment that she could give him the love he so deeply craved. “Thank you, Audric. You’re a better man than you know.”

“If you say so,” he gently bumped her shoulder with his, “And, of course you may go to the house if you wish, but don’t leave on my account, I can go if you would like to stay longer. You’re always welcome to come here whenever you desire, whether I’m here or not.”

“No, don’t go, I’m better now, and I couldn’t possibly make you leave your own treasured place.”

Before he could respond, his mother came through the garden door. “It would seem my treasured place has become a free-for-all today! I’d better go see what she needs to speak to me about. Excuse me.”

He jumped up and went over to meet her. Léa stood up as well and made her way to the lunch trays, picking up something to eat and watching the two as they talked at a distance from her.

As Audric approached his mother, she waved a letter at him. “Audric,” she was slightly out of breath, “you will never believe the letter I’ve just received from your sister.”

“What is it? Is she well?” his face clouded and his voice carried worry.

“Yes, yes, quite well, but she says she’s coming to visit. She received my letter saying you’d taken a wife and now she wants to meet her.”

“I can’t imagine Aunt has approved of this, she’s never wanted to travel down this far to give Lisette a visit before. Or, at least, that was the excuse. I know it was me she didn’t want to see.” He paused, “You told Lisette I’d taken a wife?”

She lowered the letter, “Yes, well, I thought the deed would be done before it would matter to your sister.”

“Hm, when is she coming?”

“Tomorrow! It says so in her letter. My sister will not accompany her, but she will have someone to travel with to be sure. Oh, Audric, I need to find Villeneuve, she needs to prepare Lisette’s old room and go to the city. We’ll need to plan her favorite meals and what else? We’ll need to choose a different maid for Mademoiselle Du Bois, Lisette will want Marguerite. Or do you think she’ll bring one of my sister’s maids?”

“Mother, Mother, calm down.” He took her by the shoulders, “We’ll work everything out.”

She gave him a condescending glare, “That’s what your father used to say. Men never know what multitude of details go into entertaining. Well, well, I have to track down Villeneuve, but I wanted to tell you first off.” She squinted as she glanced in the distance. “Is that Mademoiselle Du Bois?” They both turned to see Léa, her mouth full, sitting by the food trays. She stopped when she saw them staring in her direction, put a hand to her mouth and tried to swallow the large mouthful of food. Not knowing what to do, she waved.

Audric waved back then turned back to his mother, “Yes, I invited her here.”

“Well, if that is what you wish, I won’t stand in the way.” She turned to leave, then stopped, “Oh, and do be so good as to speak to her about behaving herself in front of Lisette.”

He gave her an incredulous laugh, “And what do you think she’ll do to embarrass you, slide down the banisters?”

“You never know with these village girls. I am off!” She lifted the letter and bustled away.

Upon returning to Léa, he told her, “It would seem my sister has taken it upon herself to visit at last.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful! Isn’t it? I know it’s been some time, but you’ll be happy to see her, won’t you?”

“I’ll be happy to see her, of course, though I do wonder how much she remembers of me and whether she still thinks of me fondly.”

“Why is she coming now, after all this time?”

“Well, we have you to thank for that. I do have to warn you though, Mother has told her we’re already married. I hope that won’t be too embarrassing for you.”

“Oh, well, I’m sure once she knows that we plan to, all will be well.”

“Of course.” He smiled, grateful for her understanding.

“You should eat, it’s very good.” She gestured toward his untouched tray.

Planting himself on the ground, he reached for a strawberry and brought it to his mouth, then stopped, “I wouldn’t have thought even two weeks ago that I would’ve been ready to be seen by you, Léa, and you have been so good to me.” He looked up to her. “Now I find myself

apprehensive at the thought of going through it all over again. Do you think she will accept me as she once did? She's likely to be a different person now."

Léa leaned over, "Audric, I don't believe she would come here now, uninvited, if she didn't remember her brother fondly and desire to join in his happiness."

He looked down at his strawberry, then back up at her, "I'm thankful to have you by my side at least."

"And I'm happy to be there for you."

After lunch, Audric encouraged her to change. "For tree climbing," he'd said. She did so, but she was still doubtful it would work out. The tree he chose had sturdy, spread-out branches that would be easier to reach, and he produced a ladder for assistance.

He took off his coat and heavy boots, and Léa gave him an apprehensive look.

"I'll climb up first, then we'll work it out from there," he told her before climbing to a limb with the agility of an acrobat. By now, she was interested to see how this was going to play out.

"Climb up the ladder, it will be easier for you that way," he called down as he held it steady from above. Léa hitched her skirt up and climbed until she was a little higher than level with the branch.

"Now, perhaps, give it a hop on over and I'll steady you."

Léa laughed at the very idea of all this. She made to do it, then stopped. "You promise you won't let me fall?" She eyed him warily.

"I wouldn't encourage you to do it if I thought you'd fall," he said matter-of-factly.

"Of course," she nodded and drew in a breath, "Well, do or die, I suppose." She then hopped back onto the branch beside him and, sure enough, he caught her around the waist and steadied her against him. He didn't let go until she adjusted into a secure position.

Léa looked out over the garden. Seeing it from that vantage point was like looking down on a painting. The birds chirped and sang and the sunlight sent its rays through the branches above them. As she turned her head up to take it all in, Audric thought how nice her nearness felt. How many times when he was younger had he sat here longing for someone to

share such peaceful moments with, and his heart ached again, so near, yet he feared she might be just out of reach forever.

Turning her gaze to him, she smiled and his breath caught, she really was distractingly beautiful. He smiled back and had Léa been able to look past the animal-like hair of his face, she would have noticed that he had a decidedly attractive smile. Instead she sat there oblivious to it, thinking instead how thoughtful it was of him to find a way to bring her up here.

“What do you think, worth the effort?” he asked.

“Definitely!”

They sat for some time, taking in the peaceful scene in companionable silence, Audric thinking that the moment was pretty near perfect.

As the day wore on, they parted ways. When evening came, Léa entered the dining room to find the partition gone and Audric standing by the table waiting for her. As she approached, he pulled out the chair. It was a strange feeling to have him beside her after so many evenings of only hearing his voice. They had reached a certain level of comfort in the old routine, would their conversations be different now? Only one way to find out.

“You’re very good at drawing,” she said as Francine poured her drink, the maid giving Audric a pleased smile.

“Thank you,” he replied simply.

Léa thought for a moment. “That book of drawings you gave me, who did them?”

He looked sheepish. “I did. I copied them from the artwork we own upstairs.”

“Is there anything you don’t do well?” she asked in surprise.

“Speak to young ladies, apparently.”

Léa held back a laugh.

“Let’s just say I’ve had a lot of time to practice and have explored a variety of pursuits...unhindered.”

She gave him a challenging look, “Very well, I shall test your knowledge. I’ll give you a name, you tell me what you know.”

“I’m ready,” he bowed his head as he prepared for the first one.

“Descartes.”

“Ah,” he lifted his head, “*Cogito, ergo sum*. ‘I think, therefore I am.’ I’ve had so much time to think, I thought I would die, so...” he weighed his hands and shrugged. “‘*Cogito, ergo moriar*’ might be more to the point.”

Léa sat back and laughed.

“I’m teasing, of course. His contributions to mathematics and natural philosophy are impressive.”

“Next one! Da Vinci.”

“Italian, painter, his inventions are quite brilliant as I understand. He’s a fellow lover of nature. I’ve not seen his artwork, though Lisette has written to me about what she has seen in her travels. A true master it would seem.”

Léa stopped. A thought struck her that his knowledge was limited to what he could read in books, there wasn’t much he could experience firsthand being cooped up here.

“Where would you go, what would you do, if you could leave here?”

His face changed and he scratched a finger behind his ear. “I stopped thinking about that a long time ago,” he answered with a finality to his voice.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to cause offense.”

“No, Léa, I didn’t mean to shame you for the question. It’s just that to dream is to hope and as the saying goes, ‘Hope deferred makes the heart sick.’ I had to stop hoping for what could never happen. There were a lot of things I had to stop hoping for,” he said as he locked eyes with her.

She lowered her gaze and pondered his words.

“Come with me,” he stood up suddenly and went to the wall across from them.

Léa sat confused. Go with him...to the wall? She stood up slowly.

“I’m not crazy, come here,” he smiled and beckoned.

As she came nearer, he went to a nearby side table and flipped something underneath it then took the candelabra off the top. A hidden door moved back and slid to the side. Now she was intrigued! Audric disappeared inside and Léa looked back at Francine and Édouard, who laughed silently and nodded and gestured for her to follow. Audric poked

his head back out. “Coming?” he asked. She tilted her head and gave him a befuddled smile, then shrugged and trotted after him.

A stairwell met her as she came through the doorway. It was dark, but she could see Audric's frame and the candles that he held as he ascended the stairs. They climbed several stories' worth of stairs as they curved slowly up. Finally, the stairs ended and he turned and handed her the candelabra, then pushed up on a trap door. Pulling himself up through it, he lowered his hand, first for the candles, then to assist her through. They were at the top of one of the towers of the château. Audric led her to the wall and leaned on his elbows to look out. Léa followed suit and was amazed by what she saw. The snow-capped mountains of the French Alps were spread out before her. She took a deep breath of the fresh mountain breeze that blew past her. On the other side, the trees of the forest were like a green blanket and beyond she could see the entire village.

Audric joined her on the village side. “Whenever I feel like I can't take the isolation one more day, I come up here. Not quite the same as being part of it, but it helps.”

“Well, sometimes I think you're not missing much, in the village at least.”

He tilted his head as though he didn't believe her.

“That was a thoughtless thing to say, I'm sure you would give anything to leave,” she was quick to correct herself.

He turned to lean his back against the wall and looked at her thoughtfully, “What do you mean when you say I'm not missing much?”

“Just that, while I can't claim to know the depth of loneliness you must feel, it is possible to be surrounded by people and still feel alone.”

He turned back to resting on his elbows, seeing what she was seeing. “Were you lonely, Léa?” he asked.

She gave him a sad smile, but said nothing.

“Paris,” he said.

“Hm?” she turned to him.

“If I could go anywhere, I would go to *l'Académie de Sciences* at the Louvre in Paris. I receive the regular *Comptes Rendus* journal of their discoveries and proceedings and would love to study there.”

“Of all the places in the world to see, you would go to another place to study?” she asked incredulously.

Embarrassed, he laughed, "I'm hopeless, I know."

She thought about what he said before and hoped that his life wasn't completely without hopes and dreams that could be fulfilled. "Thank you for bringing me here."

He smiled softly at her.

Léa thought for a moment then her expression turned to dismay, "Is there a passage to my room—a secret one I mean?"

Audric laughed through his nose, "No." Then he stood up and turned to her, "I hope you know I wouldn't spy on you if there were."

She quirked an eyebrow, "I think I do but just the possibility of someone being able to would be enough to keep me up at night." She laughed, then stopped and thought about that possibility. "You are sure there's not?"

"I'm positive." He smiled. "If there was one, I would have found it, I was quite the explorer as a child."

"Will you show me more sometime?"

"Certainly. There's one that leads to the kitchen that comes in quite handy."

"Ooh! Yes, show me that one."

"I must warn you though, use that one with caution, Cook isn't always happy when I invade her kitchen unexpectedly."

They laughed together then returned to the dining room for their supper.

Chapter 14

The carriage rolled through the gates late the following afternoon. The servants lined up outside on either side of the main entrance as Duchesse d'Aramitz, her son, and his bride-to-be came down to meet the carriage. Audric held back as his mother went forward. Léa stopped and looked up at him. "All will be well, Audric," she reassured him and placed her hand in the crook of his arm. He nodded his head and gave her a nervous smile as he stood a little straighter.

Devereux opened the carriage door and a petite, sprightly young woman hopped out, dressed in the latest fashions with a wide *paniers* holding her skirts out at her hips, a mop of curly hair, and a large hat. A stoic lady's maid stepped down after her.

"*Bonjour, Mother!*" she practically shouted as she first kissed her mother's cheeks then gave her a light hug.

"*Bonjour, darling,* you might have given us more of a warning of your arrival, we only had your letter yesterday."

"I'm sorry, Mother, I knew Aunt would change her mind in sending me if I didn't come right away."

"And how long will you be staying, dear?" the Duchesse tried to be sweet.

"Trying to get rid of me already?" the girl's enthusiasm waned slightly.

"Of course not, I just like to be prepared for these things, you know."

Her voice lowered and she could barely keep back a sigh as she replied, "Yes, I know. You may tell Villeneuve I'll be here for the summer, at least."

The girl then looked over her mother's shoulder and stepped around her. She calmed as she walked up to Audric.

"Brother?" she almost whispered.

"Lizzy," his voice was low but affectionate.

Her chin started to quiver and she ran into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck and closing her eyes as she savored the hug. He held her close, lifting her off her feet, and let out his breath. "I've missed you," he said as he set her down and brought her to arms' length.

"And I you." She wiped her tears. "You've grown older, Brother!" her voice grew lighter again.

Audric lifted her hands out to look her over. "And so have you! You're practically a woman."

"I like to think I *am* a woman, thank you!" She put her hands on her hips in protest.

Laughing, he said, "A very beautiful one at that!"

Beaming at his approval she plowed into him for another hug around the middle. He smiled over at Léa and mouthed his thanks.

"Lizzy, may I introduce you to Mademoiselle Du Bois?"

Lisette stood up straight and turned to Léa, "Mademoiselle?" She looked between the two.

Duchesse d'Aramitz came forward then, "I'm afraid that's my mistake, Lisette, I may have written to you prematurely of your brother's marriage. But, I trust it will come to pass shortly."

Lisette jumped up with excitement, "Then that means I haven't missed the wedding!" She giggled. "I'm so happy to make your acquaintance, Mademoiselle." She kissed Léa joyfully on each cheek. "May I call you by your given name?"

"Of course," she answered warmly, "you may call me Léa."

"What a beautiful name! I've always wanted a sister." She could hardly contain her excitement.

As they moved to walk into the château, Duchesse d'Aramitz noticed the austere woman following them in. "Have you brought a lady's maid with you, my dear?" she asked her daughter.

"Of course, Mother, I couldn't very well travel alone. Aunt and I have explained everything to her, she's promised to be discreet."

Léa noticed Marguerite's disappointment as they passed her. Lisette stopped suddenly then turned, as if remembering something. She hopped back and kissed a surprised Marguerite on the cheek. Léa smiled for Marguerite's sake, she would have to try and cheer her up later.

It wasn't long before everyone adjourned to each one's own room to dress and freshen up for the evening meal. A subdued Marguerite assisted Léa into her dress then started on her hair. As she added some dainty white flowers to her coiffure, Léa had a sudden thought.

"Marguerite, perhaps since today is a special occasion, with Mademoiselle Rousseau's arrival, we should make use of these," she gestured towards the many jars and bottles on the dressing table.

Marguerite's face lit up immediately. "Of course, Mademoiselle! Do not worry, I will make you look *très magnifique*! We'll show that sour-faced maid what Marguerite can accomplish."

Léa stifled a laugh, and submitted herself to the maid's skillful hand. When she finished, Marguerite stood back, clearly proud of her work. "You make Monsieur's flowers blush with shame and look like simple daisies," she crossed her arms and nodded her head. "*Finis!*"

These preparations had taken more time than anticipated, so when Léa entered the dining room everyone was already seated. At her entrance, Audric shot up, nearly knocking his chair over. Lisette covered a giggle with her fist.

As he pulled out the chair next to his, he said, "You look..." he swallowed, "that is..."

"I think what my brother is trying to say is that you look *ravissant*, Léa," Lisette interjected.

"Mm hmm," he managed as he took his seat again, "That is to say, you always look lovely, just especially so this evening." He finally found his tongue.

Sitting in regal posture, Léa replied, "Thank you, Marguerite is an exceptional lady's maid."

"Oh, dear Marguerite! I would love to have her attend me while I'm here, but I'm afraid Beatrice would feel slighted."

Léa softened her composure, "Marguerite will be very happy to hear that, I think."

Duchesse d'Aramitz cleared her throat and rang a bell, "If you are all quite ready, we'll leave off talk of servants at supper."

Léa stiffened and thought how glad she was that the fine lady hadn't been included in meals previously. They would never have had an open conversation. Though it did occur to her that she must have been

taking her meals entirely alone and wondered if she might not be almost as lonely as her son. For the first time, Léa felt a small measure of compassion for the woman.

A lull continued after the first course was served. Léa decided to risk scandalizing the lady of the house further by broaching a new topic, “How were your travels, Lisette?”

“Long! And tiring, but I was excited to come.” She smiled sweetly at Audric.

“Do you enjoy living in Paris with your aunt?” Léa sipped her soup.

Lisette’s eyes flitted to the other two, then she answered without emotion, “I am very grateful to my aunt for allowing me to live with her. Paris always has something exciting to take part in. Have you been there yourself?”

“I was born and raised there and have only lived in the Alps a short time. My father was a merchant until circumstances compelled us to live in the mountain cottage that he bought some time ago for my mother.”

“How very interesting. Does your mother prefer the mountains then?”

“From what I understand she did. She died when I was very young.”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Lisette grew quiet.

After more silence, Léa tried again, “Do you have many friends and acquaintances in Paris?”

“Lots! Though no favorite friends. Jean Allard paid me great attention, but he had an awful habit of dozing when I talked to him for any length of time.”

“Allard? Is his brother’s name Albert?”

“Yes, do you know him?”

“Albert Allard was engaged to my sister Marie...until our circumstances changed.”

“What a dishonorable man! I’m glad I don’t like his brother then. Did you have many beaux in Paris?”

Everyone’s eyes shifted to Léa, who squirmed at this particular subject being turned to her.

“There were...admirers, yes.”

“Whom? Anyone I would know?”

Léa shrugged, “Rémy Archambault would have married me, I suppose to his credit, even after we left.”

Leaning over, Lisette said in surprise, “*Prince* Rémy Archambault? Léa, do you speak truth? He’s the most sought-after young man in Paris!”

Duchesse d’Aramitz looked mildly impressed while Audric watched Léa with something like concern.

Realization began to form on Lisette’s face. “You’re his ‘*raison d’être*,’ you’re the ‘beauty that got away’ that all the men speak of. But, Léa...you’ve certainly done well to choose my brother, I won’t argue there, but did none of those men suit your fancy?”

“Lisette.” There was a warning in the Duchesse’s voice.

“Forgive me, Léa, Audric, I meant no offense,” Lisette apologized.

An uncomfortable silence followed.

Léa caught Lisette’s eye and gave her a kind smile. “They all wanted what they didn’t have, my sisters, their suitors, Monsieur Archambault. A title, money. Prince Rémy had both of those things, but he wanted something else, a prize that no one else could win. Everyone knew...” she glanced at the Duchesse, then came back to Lisette, “Let’s just say he had other ‘reasons for being’ and the only person he loved was himself. He would have married me, yes, but he would have done nothing to help my family. All those men are like puffs of smoke, impossible to escape and without substance. You do well not to give your heart to any of them, Lisette.”

Léa left off trying to start any more conversations, but Lisette watched her whenever she thought she wouldn’t be noticed. After supper, they all rose to enjoy tea and coffee in their mother’s sitting room, but Léa was certain she would just be in the way today.

“If it will not cause offense, I think I shall leave you now and return to my room for the evening,” she didn’t want to appear rude, but she didn’t know how else to manage an exit.

“Please join us, Léa, it will be so much more enjoyable with you there,” Lisette pleaded and grabbed her hand.

“I’m sure the young woman knows her own mind, Lisette,” the Duchesse was still as controlled as ever, though quieter. Léa felt she was making the right decision.

Before she could turn in the direction of her room, Audric stopped her and spoke quietly so the others wouldn't hear as they continued up the stairs, "Are you well? Has talk of your mother and father saddened you again?"

She smiled appreciatively, "No, I am well, truly. Enjoy the evening with your family."

He placed a hand on her arm, and spoke close to a whisper, "Are you sure? You are part of our family now, I would hate to think you would feel yourself unwelcome."

"Please don't feel uneasy on my part, I will probably just read for a short while and retire early. I think your sister might enjoy some time with her brother." She nodded in Lisette's direction and Audric turned to find her watching them with curiosity.

"Very well. I shall miss your company," he said with feeling and took her hand to kiss it.

Léa watched as he turned to Lisette and took her arm in his. She smiled at their affection for one another. Once in her room, she rang for Marguerite to help her undress and told her what Lisette had said about her, for which the maid was very pleased. A fire burned cozily in her fireplace, so once in her nightdress, she found a book and sank into her bed.

Léa read for a good two hours when there was a knock at her door. Gasping in surprise, she looked down at her nightdress and hoped it wasn't Audric.

"Who's there?" she called out.

"It's me, Lisette," a young voice returned.

"Come in, Lisette."

The girl came in and shut the door, she was in her nightdress as well. "Do you mind if we sit and talk for awhile?" she asked hopefully.

"I don't mind at all." Closing her book, she set it on her night table and patted the bed in front of her. Lisette didn't hesitate, she smiled wide and hopped onto the bed, immediately chattering and asking questions.

"I've always wanted a sister! How old are you?"

"Twenty. Oh, wait, twenty-one. Today was my birthday!" she smiled.

"What! Did you have a celebration before I came?"

“No, no one knew.”

“Well, that must be remedied. Wait, why didn’t Audric know?”

She looked down, “I didn’t tell him. He was anxious about your visit, and I didn’t want to make him feel guilty for focusing on you. But it really is no trouble, I don’t mind. It is my first birthday away from my family though.”

“Do you miss your family? And your mother?”

“Yes. But I’ve come to accept my life here.”

Lisette studied her face for a moment. “Do you love my brother?”

Léa was surprised by the question. She attempted to answer carefully, “I have an admiration for him. He is very kind, but I still have known him only a short time.”

“But, you will take care, won’t you? To...not hurt him.” She watched Léa wide eyed, waiting for an answer.

“I would be very sorry if I hurt him,” she answered softly.

Lisette seemed satisfied with that answer, so she continued, “I’ve missed him dreadfully, and Father, and Mother too, though she can be insufferable. I was so angry when they sent me away, it felt like they didn’t want me, that I lost my whole family that year.” She lowered her eyes.

Léa touched the girl’s arm, “Your brother has spoken to me about sending you away, and I know he did what he thought was best for you. He was worried that you might blame him for the decision that was very difficult for him to make.”

The girl’s eyes softened as she said, “Thank you for saying so!” Her face gleamed. “I’m seventeen this year. Aunt is anxious to further introduce me to society, but I don’t know that I want to be introduced. When I heard about you, I thought perhaps I’d be permitted to return home, that we could be a real family. You wouldn’t mind that, would you?”

“I would be delighted for your company, but I’m afraid I would have very little say in the decision. Your mother has some very definite ideas about things.”

“Yes, Mother,” her voice turned to disappointment, “She has always favored Audric. In part I see why, and of course I do not blame him. I guess I don’t blame her either, she’s known many disappointments

in life. I just don't understand why she refuses to live the life she has to the full. No, circumstances aren't ideal, but why can't she see that her children love her and be happy about it?"

"Grief can be a heavy burden to bear, and she's carried more than one kind of grief. Some, like your brother, are strengthened by it, while others may turn bitter. But we mustn't give up on her, she may come around yet."

"Oh, I am glad you're here!" she exclaimed, then went on to talk about her life in Paris and the people she knew there, all her friends and the many parties she'd attended. She went on for so long without requiring a response that eventually Léa lay her head on the pillow while she watched and listened to the girl. Before long she was asleep, and some time after that when Lisette realized the fact, the girl curled up next to her and wrapped her arm around her soon-to-be sister.

Chapter 15

A flurry of feet and the sound of several voices in the hall woke Léa the next morning. She found Lisette asleep beside her, snuggled close. Pulling back the covers carefully, she crept out of bed and picked up a nearby dressing gown. Slipping it on, she peeked out the door. Several servants were opening all the doors on her floor and others were coming down the stairs. She walked out to the stairway and caught Audric as he was coming down.

“What has happened? What’s the matter?” she asked him.

“Beatrice went in to check on Lisette this morning and she’s not in her room, and her bed is unslept in. We’ve searched everywhere.” He ran a hand through his hair and drew in an anxious breath.

Léa closed her eyes and put a hand to her head, “She is safe; she is in my bed. She came to chat last night and we must have fallen asleep.”

A bleary-eyed Lisette came out of the room. “What’s going on?”

Audric rushed to her and hugged her close, “We were worried, Sister, we couldn’t find you anywhere.”

As realization dawned on her, she hugged him back, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to worry everyone. But, truly, where would I have gone?” She wanted to laugh, but knew no one would see humor in the situation just now.

“I don’t know, we just panicked when we couldn’t find you,” he brought her to arms’ length, “I’m just glad you’re safe!” He let out a relieved laugh.

Léa came toward them and before Audric could think better of it, he pulled her close, hugged her, and kissed her cheek. “Thank you,” he whispered in her ear. The hair on his face tickled her cheek. She reached up, touching her cheek and laughed softly, a bit surprised by it all.

“All is well, we’ve found her!” he called down the hall and up the stairs.

Lisette pulled his arm around her shoulders and started walking him down the hall, “Now that I have you here, there’s something we need to discuss.” She turned her head back and winked at Léa, who shook her head and went back into her room to dress.

After Léa finished breakfast, Francine came to deliver the message that her presence was requested in the hedged garden. She made her way there promptly and was delighted as she opened the garden door to find flower petals dispersed on the path leading to the little cottage where a garland of flowers hung from the doorway and a large quilt was spread out on the grass. Lisette and Audric stood in front of the door and announced birthday greetings as she approached them. Lisette held a bouquet of starburst blue cornflowers interspersed with other wildflowers. She handed them to Léa, who drank in the scent of them and glowed with appreciation.

There were games to play and stories told. Lisette gifted her a fan with a pastoral scene painted on it, and Audric presented a simple but elegant necklace with a single ruby pendant attached. Léa smiled tenderly at him and clasped the necklace around her neck. After gifts, a rich assortment of picnic foods were brought out, including a variety of dainty desserts.

All fit to burst, they laid out on the blanket side by side and watched the clouds. After several minutes Audric turned onto his side and rested his head in his hand. Lisette was quietly watching the sky with her hands clasped in front of her. He looked over her to find Léa fast asleep. He smiled and turned his attention back to Lisette.

“Lizzy?”

“Hm?” She turned her head to him.

“Do you...blame me for sending you away after Father’s death?”

She shifted so she could see his face more clearly, “I didn’t blame you, but I was angry and hurt for many years.”

“You aren’t any longer?”

“No. I couldn’t be after Aunt brought me to a masque last year at Comtesse du Barbary’s house. As *entertainment*,” she emphasized the word with disdain, “they brought out a man with a deformity. He was ogled and laughed at. I couldn’t think of anyone but you and how easily it could be *you* that was considered entertainment for those fine ladies and

gentlemen. When we returned home, I cried and cried and knew that, however misguided,” she gave him a tearful smile, “you were trying to protect me from the life that you needed to live. A life that would become even more restricted for me when Father died.”

He lowered his head and answered barely above a whisper, “You must know how much I struggled to make that decision, to know what would be best for you. I was still young myself. But it was you alone that I thought of in making it.”

“I know, and I understand.” She sat up and turned to look down at him, “But, now that I’m old enough to know what the world is like, please let me come home. I don’t want to be anywhere else except with you and mother, and Léa.” Audric sat up and leaned against the bench that was behind him. They both watched the sleeping beauty next to them.

“I love her already, you know,” she told him.

“Lizzy...” He looked away and searched for words.

“Before you say no, please just think it through, I know what I’m asking.”

“It’s not that, of course I want you to stay if that is your wish. It’s Léa, she doesn’t...I don’t know if...”

“What is it, Brother?”

Before he could say more, Léa stretched and turned over in their direction.

“Hello,” she smiled up at them, “Did I fall asleep?”

“You did!” Lisette stood up and reached down to pull Léa to her feet. Léa stretched again.

“We have one more thing planned, are you ready?” Audric reached up an arm to Lisette and she strained to help him up as well.

“I’m ready if you are.” Léa grinned and clasped her hands under her chin.

Audric led them inside the cottage where he seated himself behind the harpsichord. Lisette directed Léa to the chaise lounge by the far window and joined her brother. Audric played while Lisette sang. Together they gave a delightful performance that Léa clapped enthusiastically for.



After the evening meal, Lisette and her mother continued to the sitting room, while Audric stopped Léa, taking her hands in his. "I have one more birthday surprise for you. Now, close your eyes." She gave him a suspicious look, then closed them compliantly. Opening a door, he led her inside and positioned her just so, then told her to take a look. She opened her eyes and immediately brought her hands to her mouth. Scanning the room, she let her eyes wander over the glorious beauty of thousands of books. An elaborate staircase began on her left and rose above them, wrapping around the top as a landing, then coming back down on her right, completely lined with bookshelves. On the ground level were more bookshelves lined on the right and the left, and straight ahead was an enormous fireplace with several chairs one could curl up in, a settee, and a few small tables with candelabra on them.

"It's magnificent!" she cried, her hands on her cheeks.

"It's yours," he grinned.

"What?" She was in a daze.

"Mother has her own small library, so she has no occasion to come here. Father began the collection and it has been added to over the years on my behalf. Now I give it to you. It can be your haven."

Before he realized what was happening she leaped into his arms and hugged him tight around the neck. "Truly?" She could hardly believe it.

He laughed, "Of course. Happy birthday, Léa."

She squealed like a schoolgirl and ran up the stairs, running a hand over the books as she went. She scrambled up a ladder and pulled a book out just because, then ran back down the stairs with it. She pulled out a few more books from the shelves below, piling them on a table, and climbing into one of the chairs to test it out. "Oh, I could stay here for hours." She leaned her head against the back of the chair.

"Just remember your friends from time to time," he smiled.

Léa sat up, "Oh, of course you and Lisette should join me!"

Jumping back out of the chair and taking his hands, she said, "Audric, I could never thank you enough for something like this. It's not just the library—I mean who else could give me a whole library! More than that though, no one but Father and Madame Beaumont have ever taken the time to know me so well."

“I’m glad you like it,” he answered.

“Like it?” she laughed and spun around, “It’s wonderful!”



One fine morning, Lisette decided a ride around the property was in order and went in search of Léa to join her. Once on their mounts, they rode toward the open fields of the Rousseau property and found Audric coming from the hedged garden. They pulled up before him and he stepped back quickly, he seemed uneasy.

“We’re going for a ride, Audric, you should join us. Afterwards we’re going to visit Grand-mère Helene,” Lisette told him.

“No, you go on. Enjoy your ride.” He smiled anxiously and moved to return to the house.

“Wait, don’t tell me you still don’t ride!”

Audric eyed the horse and jumped when the creature nickered.

“Do you dislike horses, Audric?” Léa asked him, surprised.

“I don’t know if dislike is the right word. My parents have always been a little...sensitive when it came to my associating with animals. I was never allowed a horse or pet of my own. I admit, they make me rather nervous now.”

Lisette burst out laughing, a little too hard.

“Lisette, don’t make fun, I don’t think your brother meant it as a joke.”

“I’m sorry, Brother, but it’s just so ridiculous. You couldn’t have an animal because of rumors spread by villagers? Was Mother afraid you’d start acting like a dog if you were given a puppy?” She started laughing again.

Audric lowered his head then gave her a rueful look. “Anyhow. I believe you were about to go for a ride?”

“Oh, just come with us, you can ride with me,” Lisette urged. “It’s been ages since I’ve seen Grand-mère Helene, and I’m sure you owe her a visit as well.”

“You’re right. But I’m walking!” He held up a finger. “I’ll cut her some flowers and meet you there when you’re finished with your ride.”

“Flowers? But she’s blind, Audric!”

“She may be blind, but she can still smell.”

“Oh, right. Very well, we’ll meet you there.”

Lisette and Léa rode off together while Audric turned back to the garden.

“Is Grand-mère Helene your grandmother?” Léa asked.

“Oh, no, of course not, she’s Devereux’s mother. She lives with them in the servants’ cottages. Sweet as can be, but very old and very blind. Without fail, she always told Audric he needed a haircut even when Devereux explained.” Lisette giggled. “But she enjoyed our visits as much as we enjoyed seeing her. She has the best stories to tell.”

After some time of riding through the open fields, they noticed Audric on the path to the cottages, so they reined in the horses and galloped to meet him there.

A dozen or so children gathered as Léa and Lisette dismounted. New faces were always cause for excitement. As Audric approached, they all scattered giggling and whispering. All of them except three small stair-step children who stayed planted in place to greet him.

“*Bonjour*, Monsieur!” they all called out.

“*Bonjour*, Adeline, André, Gabriel.” He tussled the youngest boy’s hair. “Would you children be so good as to let Grand-mère Helene know we wish to see her if she’s feeling up to visitors?”

Adeline and André ran off immediately, but Gabriel stayed and stared shyly at the two women. Seeing where the boy was looking, Audric lifted him up and brought him to them.

“Gabriel, this is Lisette, my sister, and Léa.”

“*Bonjour*, Gabriel,” they both greeted him.

The boy buried his face in Audric’s neck. Audric patted his back and whispered, “It’s okay, Gabriel, they’re nice. Except for the small one, she’s only nice sometimes.”

Lisette smacked her brother in the arm.

“See, I told you.”

Gabriel peeked out and giggled. The two other children returned and told them they could come in.

The group entered a cottage and found the older woman sitting in a comfortable chair, knitting. Two more children sat close by, one with a book, another with knitting of her own.

“Grand-mère Helene, I’ve brought some visitors to see you today,” Audric told her.

“Ah, come here, my boy, you’ve not come to visit me yourself of late.”

He set down the small boy and knelt before her.

“I could smell those roses from outside. What color are they today?”

“Pink and yellow.”

“Mm,” the lady brought them close to her and drank in the scent.

“Adeline, would you take them and put them in some water? Thank you, child.”

Once the flowers were taken away, she reached over and ran her hands over Audric’s face.

“Still not cut your hair?” She clicked her tongue. “And no wife yet either, I’ll wager. The hair makes the man, my boy, mark my words.”

Audric lowered his head and smiled. “Not yet, I’m afraid, but I have brought someone to meet you.” He reached a hand to Léa, who came forward and knelt down as well. “This is Léa, Grand-mère.”

The grandmother reached over and gently felt the girl’s face. “Mm, she’s young, this one.” She caressed Léa’s cheek with her thumb, “Why are you sad, my darling?”

Audric looked up at the pair abruptly then over at Lisette, who gave him a worried look.

Léa didn’t speak, but a tear ran down her face and she started to snifle.

“There, there, Darling,” Grand-mère Helene leaned over and kissed her cheek, then whispered something in her ear. With the woman’s hand still on Léa’s cheek, the young woman nodded. Léa dried her tears and stood up, leaning over to give the grandmother a hug. She then stepped aside with her back to the rest so she could gather herself again.

“Now where is the smiling one I haven’t seen in so long?”

Lisette smiled and bounded over, hugging the old woman tight then kissing her cheek.

“I’ve missed you, Grand-mère!”

“Oh, ho, and I’ve missed your joyful spirit, dear girl.”

After a sweet visit and several stories, the young people bid adieu and walked home, the girls leading their horses so they could walk with

Audric.

“Did you enjoy the visit, Léa?” Audric asked her.

“Yes, very much.”

“What did she say to you when we first came in?” Lisette asked outright.

“Only if you want to tell us, Léa,” Audric was quick to add.

“She told me that it was right to miss my family, but that given time, my new one could become just as dear, and...something else, that perhaps someday I’ll share,” she said quietly and looked up at Audric. After a moment, she went on, “Do her words about you bother you?”

He smiled, “No, she’s said them many times over the years and she means well enough.”

“May we go to see her again sometime?”

“Yes! We must!” Lisette exclaimed.

“That sounds just fine to me,” Audric concurred.

As they reached the house, Léa offered to take the horses back to the stable. Audric and Lisette lingered in the formal gardens together.

“Do you think Léa is terribly sad to be here?” Lisette asked, worried that their friend was unhappy but hoping she enjoyed their company as much as they did hers.

“I...don’t know.” Audric was equally concerned.

“What were you going to tell me about her in the garden the other day? When she was sleeping.”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“No, it’s not, or you wouldn’t have said anything. Tell me. I won’t stop pestering until you do, you know I won’t!”

“Okay, okay, very well. I only meant to say that I wasn’t sure if her heart could come to be as attached to...ours...as ours are to her. You told me you loved her already, I only meant to warn you that I don’t know if she’ll come to love us in the same way, or rather that she’ll love me enough to want to make her heart’s home here.”

Lisette studied her brother’s face and contemplated his words. “You don’t think she’ll love you because of how you look, you mean?”

“Yes, of course that’s what I mean.” He kicked a pebble. “Consider how many options she’s had. She didn’t choose the best of them, why would she choose me now? She didn’t know what I looked like before

agreeing to marry me. Under the best of circumstances who knows whether she would love a stranger, but to love a beast? How can I be sure she even wants to be here anymore, that she doesn't just feel trapped by her obligations."

Lisette stood in front of him to stop him and placed her hands on his arms, "You're not a beast, Audric. I don't want to hear those words come out of your mouth again! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother," he lowered his head in proper contrition.

"I'm serious. As for all those other men, she rejected every one of them even with their pretty looks and fine words. You have something to recommend you that none of them do."

"And what is that?" he asked skeptically.

"A lot of things, that's what! You have depth, you have wisdom, you have gentleness, and genuine kindness. So you're not the most witty conversationalist, but you have substance—the meat and potatoes rather than the dripping honey. Believe me, they have nothing on you as someone who's actually worthy husband material! You heard her say it yourself at dinner that first day. And most important, don't be mad at me for saying so, you really truly love her."

Audric looked at her in surprise then frowned and looked away.

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

He suddenly grew agitated and stepped away from her. "Yes, yes, it is true, but is that really enough? As much as we like to think we'll be noble and look past the exterior for true love, as much as the poets gush over love that would weather any storm, is it really fair to assume that she'll return a love for someone she's not attracted to? Have you seen that happen?" His voice grew hoarse, "Though she may appreciate the depth of conversation and that I'm not a ridiculous fop, will she rejoice at living her days with someone whose touch disgusts her..." Audric sucked in a breath through his teeth in frustration then grew quiet. "I'm sorry, Lisette."

"Audric, is that really how she feels about you or is that just what you believe about yourself?"

"She as much as told me so herself," he answered sullenly.

"But it's possible that familiarity could soften any reservations about appearance. I won't say it happens often, but it has happened. Attractions can change, there is some hope."

He turned to face her and stated emphatically, “Hope is a terribly dangerous thing.”

Chapter 16

As the days rolled on, the ever-busy Lisette decided she wanted to walk the perimeter of the grounds for a change of pace. Audric decided it would be better not to join them and stayed behind. They hadn't walked far along the long wall when they heard a whisper. Looking at each other, then around them, they noticed a wrought iron gate in the wall behind them. Jacques was calling to her in a hushed voice from behind it.

"Beauty! It's me!" he whispered sharply.

Léa inhaled, looked over at Lisette, then ran to Jacques. "Jacques, you shouldn't be here!" He stuck his arms through the gate and pulled her into a hug. She took his face in her hands and started to cry, "Jacques, it is good to see you. Are you all well? Father isn't still distressed is he?"

"Not as much as at first. We are all well, better than that, in fact, thanks to you. But what about you, I've come here several times hoping to see you. They said you were content, but I had to know for myself. He's not mistreating you, is he?"

She laughed softly through her tears, "No, Monsieur Rousseau is very kind, I lack for nothing."

"Is he what everyone says he is? Is he horrible?"

"Jacques, don't say that, he's not what the rumors say, but I can't tell you more." She glanced over at Lisette then around the other way toward the garden. "You really can't be here, if the Duchesse sees you or you see Audric..."

"Audric? And who is that young lady? She's lovely. Though she's got a scowl that could kill."

Léa looked back over at Lisette, who really was scowling death at him. "That is Lisette...Mademoiselle Rousseau." She reached through the bars and put her hands on his chest. "Jacques, it really is so good to see you. I've missed you all so much, but you must go now. Send Father my love, and let Madame Beaumont know I am happy if you can."

He nodded his head and patted her hand before she turned away and walked back to Lisette.

“Beauty!” Jacques called. When she turned he continued, “I love you.”

“And I you.” She smiled through her tears, then turned and continued walking, trying to put distance between them.

Léa looked around several times, making sure no one saw her brother. The Duchesse would not be pleased if she knew he’d been there. She sniffed and wiped her tears. Lisette walked beside her. Léa could sense her displeasure as she bored holes in the side of Léa’s face with her stare. When they were a greater distance away, she turned to Lisette.

“Lisette, please don’t tell your mother what you’ve seen today, she would be very displeased...I don’t know what she would do to my family if she knew.” She lowered her head and started to cry again.

“Léa, I’m confused,” her voice was cold, and she crossed her arms, “if Mother would be upset, I wouldn’t blame her. How can you do this to my brother? It would break his heart to see you behave as you have with that man.”

Léa lifted her head and thought for a moment, then let out her breath and took the younger girl by the arms, “Lisette, that man is my brother.”

The girl’s face and stance relaxed immediately, she released a breath and put her hand to her chest, “Well, that explains everything! I’m sorry for being so harsh, but the idea of my brother being hurt so severely—it brings out the worst in me.” She laughed, then gave Léa a big hug.

“But, Léa, Mother would be upset, no doubt, but surely she wouldn’t harm your family.”

Léa kept walking and smiled weakly, “No, surely not.” Inside she knew differently, but there would be no use in telling Lisette so.



As the summer days passed, the trio spent much of their time together. Audric and Léa soon found out that Lisette was rarely silent. Even when they turned to other things for occupation, the girl continued to chatter on either to them, whether they were listening or not, or to

Marguerite when she brought out their lunch. Marguerite loved hearing her talk, Léa was patient about it but tended to turn to the harpsichord when it came to be trying, and all of it together proved to be at the same time savored and entirely too much for Audric, who was used to almost complete silence.

When the music and the chatter turned to just plain noise and he couldn't hear himself think, Audric would quietly escape the cottage to take a turn around the garden.

Such was the case on this day. "Father in Heaven," Audric prayed, "how much you have given me these many weeks. First with Léa, then Lizzy's return. I'd forgotten what a chatterbox she was. Is it possible to love our greatest blessings and to wish for just a few moments of peace at the same time?" He laughed.

"Audric?" Léa picked up her pace to catch up with him. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"Of course, as long as you promise to enjoy the quiet for at least some of the walk."

Léa smiled, "Gladly! Lisette is such a dear, but who knew one person could have so much to say!"

"Indeed."

"Who were you talking to just now?"

"Hm? Oh, I was just complaining to God for giving me so very much." His smile broadened.

"I've never heard anyone talk to God as you do, so freely."

"Do you know God, Léa?"

"I believe in him, certainly. Doesn't everyone?"

Audric regarded her for a moment but didn't attempt to refute her, walking together in silence for a time.

Léa stopped abruptly. "Audric, how will the banns be posted and how can we marry if we can't go to the church or have a priest brought here?"

"I...don't know," he shook his head. "Did Mother not say what she had in mind?"

"No. No, she didn't." Fear started to take hold of her heart.

Audric watched her, a look of confusion on his face. "I admit I know very little about the church. The truth is, Léa, they don't recognize

me as a human being, so I can't imagine that they would recognize a marriage between us." His face clouded even more as he scrambled through his memory for anything his mother might have said about it, anything he had learned that might provide another way. Nothing. Nothing came to mind. Panic gripped him. He turned away from her and ran shaky hands over his head. "I knew this would never work," he spoke in a ragged whisper. "To cage her with the beast doesn't make a marriage, it just makes her a prisoner."

For a second, a thought flashed through Léa's mind—this could be her way out! But that would mean confirming the idea that he was nothing more than an animal, telling him to his face that he didn't have the right to live a normal life, that he didn't deserve the chance to love and be loved. Yet how could the church be so wrong in this? Then another thought struck her. What was the Duchesse's plan? To trap her here, to make her so isolated from the world that it wouldn't matter to anyone that Léa became her son's mistress? She looked over at him and thought about his words, it was clear he felt the weight of this. Even if that was what the lady had in mind, he would never accept that.

"Audric," Léa came to him and placed a hand on his arm. "We'll figure it out, don't distress yourself. You're not ready to marry now anyway, are you?"

"No," he turned to her with a small measure of hope lighting his face again. "Not if you're not."

Instead of confirming or denying that, she said, "So when that time comes, we'll find a solution. If God could find a wife for Isaac, working out every detail miraculously, then surely there's something we can do that will suffice."

Audric took her arms. "Do you think so? Do you think that perhaps God has a plan in all this? Do you..." As he looked into her eyes, the last question died on his lips. *Do you love me, Léa?* Is what he meant to say. Though it was confusing to him, he wasn't sure that the answer would be what he hoped for. She hadn't rejected him just now when she had a valid reason to do so, but she also seemed to feel only friendship for him still. Or was it merely pity? He wasn't sure of anything anymore.

Léa didn't answer his questions but threaded her arm through his and started walking again.

After some quiet and time to ponder, Léa asked, “Do you hate the church for how they’ve treated you?”

“Hate is a strong word. I can’t say that I know enough about it to reject it outright.”

“But, they reject your very existence, what more could they do against you?”

“If history is anything to judge humanity on, it shows me that there is no institution that is not subject to corruption. Yet, if you look closely, there is always some good, some light, that rises up from dark places. That light is where the true Church is. It’s kind of like the night sky. In a sea of darkness—when we see corruption for what it is—those that have the light in them are the most visible.”

“You’ve thought much about this, haven’t you?”

“*Cogito, ergo sum.*” He smiled and shrugged.

“But where do you get your knowledge of God if not from the church?”

“The Bible, mostly.”

Léa stopped. “Are you a Huguenot?” she almost whispered.

“A Protestant? No, I wouldn’t say that. Like I said, my experience with such institutions is limited to history. I do feel for their struggle and hope they find their freedom in this country one day, but there is corruption even among the Huguenots. Although...Léa, do you think that a Huguenot would marry us?”

“Maybe, but King Louis revoked the peace treaty, I doubt there are many left in France.”

“Hm, I’ll have to see what I can find about them in the library. Would it bother you very much to not be married under the official church?”

“I don’t know,” she lowered her head as they walked on. “It’s all I’ve known, and all I know of God comes from there. I’ve had no reason to doubt before now.”

“What do you doubt exactly?” His words were gentle.

“Well, one thing that I will never doubt is that you are indeed a man, a human being, and a good one at that. Anyone who says otherwise can’t be anything but wrong, no matter who it is that says it.”

Audric's hand curled over Léa's on his arm, and his words came out heavy with emotion, "I've waited a long time to hear someone outside of my own household say what you've just said. I can't...words could never say what that means to me."

A gentle smile lit her eyes and for a moment Audric thought he saw something deeper than friendship, deeper than a need to tend something wounded, deeper even than admiration or respect. But as quickly as it came, it also left as Lisette and Marguerite called out to them that it was time to return to the house.



Supper was even quieter than usual. Léa sensed that Audric was still contemplating the logistics of their wedding, and she wanted, by all means, to keep him from asking his mother about it. She didn't want to hear the Duchesse's answer, nor did she think it wise to disrupt the delicate balance that kept Léa, as well as her family, in the lady's good graces.

Finally, Audric turned to his mother. "Mother, there's..."

"Lisette, did you say there was a play you thought we'd find amusing?" Léa interrupted.

Audric stopped and looked between Léa and Lisette.

"Yes, Molière's *The Misanthrope*. His plays are all the rage in Paris."

Léa nodded, and Audric turned back to his mother, but before he could say anything further, Léa hurried to say, "Perhaps you can read some to us tonight."

"Of course! How delightful! Perhaps we can recruit Marguerite and some of the others and everyone can read a different part..."

Lisette continued to talk, while Léa glanced in Audric's direction. He looked confused, so she gave him an almost imperceptible shake of the head. This was enough to keep him from trying again, though his face still registered confusion.

When Lisette finished saying what she had to say, the Duchesse turned to Audric and said, "What were you trying to say before you were interrupted?" The lady sized Léa up and down.

"Oh, it was nothing, don't trouble yourself."

In the sitting room, the Duchesse vetoed the reading of the play, so they took up cards instead.

“What do you like to play, Léa?” Lisette asked.

“I prefer Lansquenet, but I’m fine with playing whatever everyone else wants to play.”

“Mama, will you play?”

“Yes, but I’ll only play Ombre,” the lady answered.

“Mother...” Audric shook his head and would have defended Léa’s choice, but she placed a hand on his arm and announced that Ombre was just fine.

“But, Mother, Ombre only calls for three players,” Lisette noted.

“I’ll sit out, it’s really no trouble,” Léa offered.

“No, I’ll sit out. I hardly ever play cards, and I’d likely ruin the game anyway,” Audric insisted.

They both turned to look at the Duchesse, who made no move to defer, so they proceeded.

As it turned out, Léa was skilled in both games and won two hands, after which the Duchesse gave her a sour expression and declared she didn’t wish to play any longer.

“Oh, come now, Mother, don’t be a spoil sport,” Audric scolded.

“Of course, *C’est la vie!*” she exclaimed as she sat in her armchair.

There was something in her tone that Audric didn’t like.

“Why are you acting this way?” he asked in a low tone as he turned toward her from the table.

“It is not for you to censure how I behave, child.”

“He’s not a child, Mother,” Lisette firmly interjected.

Duchesse d’Aramitz was beginning to see a hierarchy of defense, to which she was at the bottom.

“Perhaps it’s time we all adjourned for the evening,” she responded.

Léa had grown increasingly uneasy during this conversation and now felt guilty. She knew she could win and did so not for the enjoyment of the game but to triumph over the woman in this small way.

As the three young people began to leave the room, Lisette turned and told her mother, “You know you’re quite a bully sometimes!” and closed the door behind her.

In the hall, the girl crossed her arms and humphed, “One of these days I’m not going to be able to hold back what I really want to say to her.”

“Oh, no, please don’t say that Lisette, I shouldn’t have...” Léa wasn’t sure what to admit to.

“Been better than her at cards? Hardly something to feel sorry about.”

“Truly, Léa, you have no reason to defend our mother’s behavior, she can be very rude to you at times,” Audric added.

“That may be so, but I don’t wish to stir up trouble between you all.”

“I know, why don’t we go to the library for poetry reading?” Lisette changed the subject.

“You two go ahead, I’m a little tired this evening.”

Audric watched her thoughtfully as she descended the stairs, but didn’t protest as Lisette led him away to the library. Once in her room, Léa kicked the dressing table in disgust, then immediately regretted doing so as she plopped on the bed to nurse her throbbing toes.

Chapter 17

History wasn't a subject that Audric had studied recently, so it took him a while to find the books he was looking for. Flipping through his father's stack of newsprint, he tried to find anything that mentioned the Huguenots. Before he moved his pile to a table, he noticed something set on top of the books on a low shelf. Taking it up, he realized the contents were written in his father's hand and his breath caught—his journal! Leaving everything else, he took it to the table on the upstairs landing where he was, and opened it.

It started around the time of his father and mother's wedding. He read:

"My bride is not what I expected her to be, not that I knew what to expect exactly. She told me on our wedding night that I wasn't to think of making any professions of love now or in the future. She'd given her heart to love once, only for it to be crumbled to dust before her. Never again would she make room in her heart for such a love, and to not expect it from her. We would do our duty by each other and to the family name and no more.

"Indeed, she seems to be fixated on duty and perfection. Though we have only been married a short while, I already feel the effects as it is difficult to please her in anything..."

Audric hurt for his mother and whatever had caused her to give up on love. He hurt for his father as well. Whether he wanted it or not, the chance at love was denied him from the start. He skipped ahead a few pages and continued reading.

"It would appear that my wife is barren, and it pains me to watch her pine. She refuses any comfort from me and instead pours herself into the household and entertaining. Her 'duty' to me has

increased as well, though I fear I will not be able to give her what she so desperately longs for.”

Rubbing the back of his neck, he flipped forward again.

“At long last God has seen fit to give us a child, a son. He has an unusual hairiness to him. The doctor seems to think that perhaps it will fall out in time...”

“We have been to the priest to baptize our son, and what he said was most disturbing. He called our child the fruit of the devil, born of sin, and that we should repent. He said it would be a mercy to let the child die. Hortence is taking it very hard and I struggle to comprehend these happenings. We have both been as devout as we know how to be. I can’t explain why God has turned his back on us.”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“A decision has been reached. We will move to our château in the mountains, keep the child hidden, try to give him a life away from a cruel world. A change has come over Hortence. She has forsaken the duty she was so bound to, perhaps because she tried so hard to reach perfection, only to have it thrown back in her face as rubbish. Instead, her whole being is poured into the child. I confess I find myself questioning God’s wisdom in this; what could we possibly have done wrong that he would do this to our son?”

“We have named the boy Audric.”

Something twisted in Audric’s gut. Though it was a short passage on what must have been a difficult time in their lives, his father’s words gave so much insight into the situation surrounding his birth. Flipping to the last page, he read again.

“What a ray of sunshine our little Lisette is. I confess I laugh at Hortence’s reaction to her, she doesn’t know what to make of the girl. One could not find a mother and daughter so completely opposite one another in temperament. If only Hortence would let the girl’s love penetrate her calloused heart. I know there is a gaping hole left in her heart by some man, and it seems that the only love she feels secure in is her son’s. But it doesn’t seem even then to fill her up.

“I would never tell her so, but on the very rare occasions when she smiles a certain way, a genuine sort of smile where she forgets whatever darkened her heart in the first place, I get a tiny glimpse of who she really is deep down. Or, what she might have been perhaps. In those moments, I fancy I could love her if she would let me. It’s possible that I already do...

“Audric is twenty today. His devotion and intelligence astound me, and I could not be prouder of the young man he has become. I never would have guessed that my son would become the closest friend of my acquaintance. It is a crucial time for him, a time when most men find a wife and begin their own way in the world. I worry for where his life will go from here. Will he be content without companionship? Will he find purpose and meaning in life? His faith in God seems to steady him, will it be enough? His devotion shames me. We haven’t taught it to him, yet God has it would seem. Perhaps there is a plan after all. Perhaps after all, it is our children that will bring about our redemption.”

Audric smiled as tears flowed down his face. He’d never seen such a personal side to his father. Though he was kind and supportive, he didn’t always show what he was feeling. Lowering his head into his arms on the table, Audric wept for the empty place his father left when he died, and that he wasn’t here now to advise him and share in his son’s joy.

Léa slipped through the library doors and looked up to find Audric sitting at a table with his head down. “Audric?” she called out, but he

didn't respond or look up. Climbing the stairs, she called his name again, yet he still didn't move. Worried, Léa rushed to him and realized he was weeping. "Audric?" her voice softened as she gently placed a hand on his shoulder. Startled, he sat up too fast, knocking the journal on the floor.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Léa bent down to pick it up and set it back on the table. "I was worried when you didn't respond, but I can leave if I'm disturbing you."

Audric reached for her hand, "No, please don't go. Will you sit with me?"

"Of course." She sat next to him and squeezed his hand. "What's the matter, *mon chou*?"

"I've found my father's journal. I guess it just reminded me of how much I miss him." He smiled and wiped his face on his sleeve.

As he looked down at the journal, something poking out from between its pages caught his attention. He opened it at that spot and gasped at the sight of an unframed miniature of a man like him with a woman by his side. Looking over at Léa, he saw that she had the same surprised expression on her face.

Audric lifted the book and read the entry aloud to her.

"A certain man and his wife has come to my attention. I found their portrait whilst procuring art for our collection. It set me on a search for more information about the pair, and I didn't stop until I found it. Petrus Gonsalvus and his wife, Catherine, lived almost a century ago. Petrus was hairy, just like Audric. He was gifted to the King as a boy, brought to him in a cage. Petrus became a curiosity for them. He was given a nobleman's education and a wife to see what he was capable of and what kind of children would be produced from such a union. Of the children born to him, some were as himself and some were without the excess of hair. The children like the man were given as gifts to other nobles, taken from their parents and treated as something to be packaged and given to someone else!"

"I can't help but think of Audric and, right or wrong, that my decision to keep him confined is justified. If he was known to the

world, he might have the chance to travel, to marry and have children, but at what cost? I only hope he will understand this choice and that I am truly not in error."

Audric picked up the portrait again and let out a breathy laugh.
"I'm not the only one. I'm not alone!"

And neither am I, Léa thought as she took the portrait from him and looked at the woman in it. Her hand was placed affectionately on Petrus' shoulder, and Léa suddenly wished she knew more about the woman, that she could talk to her. Running her fingertips over the portrait in thought, she handed it back to Audric.

"Do you agree with what your father said? Do you prefer a life of dignity over a life without isolation?"

"I have sometimes thought that it would be better to be out in the open, to just have the worst over with, but ultimately I know I would not enjoy the 'freedom' that I have now, such as it is. Petrus' treatment only confirms how unusual it has been for my parents to do what they have for me, and how much I appreciate it."

Looking over at her, he thought for a moment then took her hand back into his.

"Léa, Father said some of their children were born the same as their father. I haven't given children of my own much thought, it seemed like such an impossibility, but how would you feel if some of our children were given the life that I have now?"

The thought of "their" children made her uncomfortable and she withdrew her hand. She tried to keep her voice even as she spoke, "You would know what kind of life they would be given better than I, Audric. Besides, there are other things to think of before such thoughts are needful, surely."

"You're right, forgive me, I wasn't expecting to find all this today. Perhaps I am getting ahead of myself." He tried not to dwell on her evasiveness and instead turned back to his father's journal.

"I'll leave you to your privacy. I came in to find a book myself, actually." Léa stood to leave.

"Thank you, Léa, for caring." He looked up at her with the trusting tenderness of a small boy and she relaxed.

“Of course.” She smiled and continued down the library stairs.

Chapter 18

The beginning of fall brought much excitement for the Rousseau household. It was market day in the city, and any of the staff that wanted to were headed to town. Duchesse d'Aramitz and Lisette were going this time as well. Lisette pleaded with Léa to come with them, but Léa had already decided against it. She knew Audric wouldn't be able to attend, and she didn't want him to be alone. She told them she looked forward to a quiet day with him. Madame Villeneuve and Devereux, Lambert, and a few others decided to stay behind as well.

Audric was secretly touched that Léa would stay behind with him, but he also didn't want her to miss out on the fun on his behalf. As everyone was loading up in carts and carriages, he took her aside. "Are you sure you don't want to go to town? You haven't been off the estate in months."

"You've never been off the estate, Audric. It will be pleasant to have a quiet day out of doors or in the library. We can give the staff the evening off and fend for ourselves for a change. It will be like old times when we had quiet dinners alone together. I miss our talks."

"Do you really?" He couldn't keep the admiration from his eyes. "If you're sure you don't mind, I'd be honored to have your company today. But you are sure?"

"Yes, of course." She smiled. "We'll have a grand time!"

Duchesse d'Aramitz walked up to them as she put on her gloves. "Cook has laid out enough food in the kitchen for a simple lunch and cold dinner. If you should need anything, Villeneuve, Devereux, and Lambert won't be far away. Oh, and if the weather turns, we may stay in town overnight. Is there anything you need in town, my dear?"

"More paper, hmm, I think that's it. Léa, is there anything you require?"

"Hm, no, I don't think so," she smiled demurely and shrugged her shoulders. If she did, she wouldn't very well ask in front of Duchesse

d'Aramitz. The woman still treated her like one of the servants—well, less than one, because she had respect for them. The lady's heart would not be so easily penetrated.

"Very well. Enjoy your day," she said warmly as she kissed her son on the cheek. She turned to go, then paused and turned to Léa, "It is good of you to stay and keep Audric company. I am obliged to you."

Audric and Léa looked at each other behind her back with wide eyes and smiled. They walked everyone out and waved as they left. Lisette waved enthusiastically out the window of the carriage until the Duchesse pulled her back in. As the gates were closed and locked, Audric turned to Léa. "Well, what shall we do first?" He raised his hands in question.

"I have some astronomy books in the library, I've been wanting to ask you some questions. Shall we go there first?"

"Certainly." He paused, then asked, "Do you enjoy cocoa?"

"I love it!"

"Then let's head to the kitchen first. I can finally show you the hidden passage there."

Once there, Audric started to heat milk, cream, and sugar in a pot on the stove then turned to the table, where Léa sat. He took out a chunk of rich dark chocolate and began to chop it.

"Why does it not surprise me that you also know your way around a kitchen?" she smirked.

"Actually, this is the only thing I know how to make," he acknowledged as he continued to chop.

"What! Something you're not expertly skilled in? How will Duchesse cope?" She put a hand to her chest in mock disbelief.

He sniffed a laugh, "I'm afraid Cook would have run an inquiring and pesky boy out of her kitchen before she would give up her secrets."

"Well, that I can believe. Yet, you can make cocoa?"

Audric brought the pot to the table and added the chocolate to melt into the creamy mixture. "You have Lisette to thank for that. Sometimes late at night she would get scared and come find me. I taught myself to make cocoa as it always seemed to comfort her."

"How sweet."

"Eh, middling, I try not to make it too sweet." He looked up without lifting his head as he stirred the luscious liquid.

She saw his playful smile and reached over to swat him on the shoulder.

Laughing, he moved out of her reach. "Hey now, this is hot."

After pouring the cocoa into two cups, he handed them to Léa and lit a candle at the stove. Coming over to one wall of the kitchen, he pulled at a lamp on the wall and a door opened to them. The passage led under the main stairs and ascended gradually, ending with a few steps up. Audric pushed at the wall and Léa found that the passage had brought them to the library.

"How perfect!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, and if you want to go back the way you came," he shut the door, which was actually one of the bookshelves, and showed her a switch under a shelf, "just lift this lever and it shall open to you."

In the library, they took their liberty and spread books out all over the floor to make a map of the night sky. Audric took off his long coat and tossed it on a chair, then rolled up his sleeves below the elbow before kneeling on the floor in front of the books. As he pointed out different constellations and what they might see this time of year, Léa noticed that his hair covered the top and underside of his forearms, and through his shirt sleeves it appeared to extend up his upper arms as well. She wondered where it ended.

"Léa?" Audric startled her out of her observations. She looked up to find him staring at her with his vibrant green eyes.

"Hm, yes?" She was embarrassed at having been caught thinking about such things.

"I asked if you would want to see some stars tonight, I have a telescope I can bring out into the garden."

"Yes, yes, that sounds lovely." She smiled awkwardly then turned back to the books. He gave her a bemused smile and did the same.

Later that afternoon, Audric gathered his telescope while Léa packed some food. They made their way to the hedged garden where Audric set up the telescope just outside the little cottage. He lit a fire in the fireplace inside and they settled in for the evening. Léa brought out the food she'd packed and they enjoyed their meal while they waited for the dark to come.

It did come soon enough and Audric went outside to the telescope, squinting one eye to look into the view piece and make the necessary adjustments, finding something of interest to look at in the process. Léa came and stood close. He traded places with her and indicated what she would see. When she looked up, they were mere inches apart and Audric held his breath. Léa noticed something in his gaze that she hadn't seen before. He wanted to kiss her. Her heart started pounding and she turned her head away quickly. "It's cold out here, isn't it..." she shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself.

They found a few more sights of interest, then settled back into the cottage. Léa read a book on the chaise lounge and Audric wrote at his desk. After some time, Audric set down his pen and rested his head on his fist. He looked over at Léa and observed her as she read. He thought how soft her skin must be and suddenly had the desire to caress her cheek, to kiss the curve of her neck. He inhaled deeply, shook his head, and rose. "I'm just going to get some fresh air," he told her as he opened the door and walked out. Léa, surprised, rose too and opened the door. "Audric, you'll catch your death out there in the cold, you don't have your coat."

"I'll be fine!" he called back. "You'd better close that door though, you'll freeze!"

She let out an exasperated huff, then closed the door and went back to her reading. After taking a turn around the perimeter, he swung back around and noticed Lambert was wrapping the rose bushes. The temperatures had dropped the past two nights and Audric knew he wanted to aid their dormancy for an early winter.

"Hello, Lambert," he called to the old groundskeeper as he strolled up, rubbing his arms vigorously as the wind began to pick up.

Lambert sat up on his heels and observed the younger man. "Monsieur. Did you have a pleasant evening?"

"Yes, thank you." He was about to head back in when he noticed the man was still watching him.

"Is all well with the roses?"

"What're you waiting for, boy?" he answered back.

Was the man impatient to have him gone? Lambert was known for being blunt, but not for being rude. Confused, Audric asked, "*Pardon?*"

"Why haven't you married the girl yet?"

That wasn't what he was expecting. Taken off guard, he mumbled, "Um, well, I..." He caught a glimpse of her through the window of the cottage where she was still reading peacefully. He turned back to Lambert, "I guess I've been afraid...afraid that she wasn't ready. In a way I was expecting her to back out of the bargain by now."

Lambert took a deep breath and stood up. "Forgive me, Master, but you know very little of the ways of the world. It would not treat her kindly were she to back out now, and you'll only make things worse if you wait—for her and you."

Audric looked over at Léa again. This time she turned and saw him. Smiling, she waved at him, and he did the same. Deep down he knew it was time, but he was still terrified.

"Might want to head back to the house," Lambert said as he turned back to the roses. "The rain will start soon."

"Yes, sir," Audric answered. "Lambert?"

"Yes, boy?"

"Thank you."

Lambert nodded in acknowledgment and Audric returned to the cottage to bring Léa back to the house.

The rain came down in sheets and persisted through the night. The wind picked up and howled against Léa's window, until it crashed in without warning. She woke in a panic and ran to the window to close it only to find that the latch was broken. The wind and icy rain flooded in on her, whipping against her face and arms. In a moment, her fire was snuffed out. The room went pitch black and she froze in terror as the rain continued to pour into the room.

Groping her way to the door, she slowly crept up the stairs, waiting every few moments for a flash of lightning to light her way for but a moment. Large homes were enticing and enchanting during the day, at night with not a single source of light, they were haunting. Especially when one's imagination runs wild. She couldn't stop thinking of Bluebeard and his locked room of blood and murdered wives. Once she made it up the stairs, she hesitated. No light flashed for several moments, her heart started pounding and her breath came heavy. Finally, she bolted down the hallway to the west wing, hoping she wouldn't trip on anything on the way but desperate to find someone in this oppressive darkness.

A flash lit the end of the hallway and illuminated several doorways. Which one was it?

“Audric! Audric!” she called. “I don’t know where you are, I need you!” she cried out.

Audric bolted upright, it took a moment to realize what he was hearing, but once he did, he stumbled out of bed, grabbing a pair of breeches and pulling them on over his nightshirt.

A door opened behind Léa and she turned quickly, seeing the faint glow of a fire and the faintest outline of a man, she ran and barreled into him.

“Shh, shh, it’s okay, Darling,” he said as he placed a hand on her back. He was suddenly aware of the thinness of her nightgown and that she was soaked to the bone and trembling. He hurried her to the fire in his room and grabbed a blanket to wrap around her.

“What happened, why are you wet?” he asked as he stood across from her by the fireplace.

Léa hugged the blanket around her. “The window in my room blew open and broke the latch. My fire went out, I didn’t know what to do.” The words came out in one steady flow.

“It’s okay, you’re safe.”

They stood quiet for a moment, but she never took her eyes off of him. She desperately wanted his comfort and he was desperately afraid to give it. In the end, it was the soft glow of the firelight against her face that drew Audric to her, lulling his senses like some hypnotic spell. He reached up and lightly caressed her cheek with the backs of his fingertips, then cradled her face in his hand. He gently brushed his thumb over her lips and leaned closer. She didn’t pull away. Audric bent his head down and kissed her softly. He waited to see how she would respond. Léa kept her eyes locked onto his. In her fear of the storm and darkness his touch was like liquid comfort, warming her inside and making her feel completely safe. When he perceived that his touch wasn’t unwanted, he tenderly moved her wet hair away from her face and slid his hand to the back of her neck. Drawing her to him, he kissed her again. His lips lingered on hers, savoring their sweetness and warmth.

Léa surrendered to his touch, so gentle, so loving. Drawing in a breath as their lips parted, she closed her eyes and brought her hand to his

where it rested on her face. She nestled into it. Audric brought her head to his chest and cradled it there, kissing the top of her head and holding her close.

Then her voice broke the spell. “Will you let me stay with you here? I don’t want to be alone.”

“Léa...” his voice was low and it took everything in him to say the words. “I can’t, not tonight.”

He let go of her, stepping away to create distance. Léa nodded, lowering her head.

“I’ll take you to Lisette’s room. There should be something dry for you to change into. She’s shorter than you, but...”

“It should suffice,” Léa finished.

Audric smiled tenderly at her. He turned and lit a candle in the fire, then led her down the hall to the east wing, past the Duchesse’s sitting room to a door down that hallway.

Once in his sister’s room, he lit a second candle before making a fire. Léa sat in front of the fireplace and watched him.

As he stood up to leave, she grabbed his hand and said, “Audric, wait.”

He sat down next to her and waited for her to speak as she kept his hand in hers.

“You’re not like other nobles. Any other man in your position wouldn’t have hesitated to allow me not only into their room but also their bed.”

Audric lowered his head and half shook it as he took in her words. “I won’t invite you into my bed until we are married. I would never ask anything from you that you weren’t willing to give, nor give what you’re not willing to receive. When we are married, it will be no different. I want you to know that. I don’t know how other nobles behave, the only one I’ve known is my father, and I’ve never seen that in him.”

“Why won’t you stay with me tonight then?”

He turned his head away and seemed to be struggling with something in his mind. Finally, turning back to her, he spoke with intensity, “I would do anything for you, Léa, anything that was right. I’m not...I’m not...I’m not a beast,” he forced the words out, “that I can’t control myself. If you want me to stay, I will. I feel, though, that you have

already given me more tonight than you would in the light of day. Forgive me if I am wrong.” He sighed and continued, “I don’t want you to come to hate me for it. I am but a man and I don’t know that I trust myself not to take what you give in the moment. I love...” he blinked and swallowed. Léa wrapped the blanket tighter around her, a chill suddenly running through her at what he meant to say.

“And that is why I said I couldn’t have you stay with me tonight. If my presence is needed, I promise that is all I will give you...”

“No, I understand.” Tears began to fill her eyes as she said, “Thank you, Audric, for everything.”

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it tenderly. “You’re safe. Get dry and warm, and sleep well. The night never lasts forever, *ma chérie*.”

She brought the back of his hand to her cheek, then let go as he stood.

He picked up the candle, bowed to her, and clicked the door shut as he went out.

After slipping into a fresh nightgown, Léa sat down on Lisette’s bed and stared absently into the fire. Her fingers were pressed to her lips where she could still feel the warmth of his kiss.

Chapter 19

Léa couldn't sleep that night and returned to her own room at first light the next morning. The room was a mess from the rain and wind blowing water and debris into it. As she started to clean it up as best she could, everything from the night before came fresh upon her and she sat down in the midst of it all and cried.

Villeneuve came into the room unexpectedly, Lambert close behind. Upon seeing the girl sitting on the floor in tears, she rushed to her and knelt down.

"My dear, what's the matter? Why are you here? Master told us what happened and we thought you'd still be in Mademoiselle's room."

Léa tried to respond, but couldn't manage it past the tears.

Villeneuve turned to Lambert, "I'll find you later."

He nodded and left the room to the women.

The older woman tenderly stroked Léa's cheek. "Will you come sit on the bed and we'll talk about it, hm?"

She nodded through her tears and allowed the housekeeper to help her up. Villeneuve waited patiently until she was ready to talk.

"He loves me," she finally said, looking down as she fiddled with the sleeve of Lisette's nightgown.

"Of course he does, Dear," the woman replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Does that distress you?"

"Not exactly. It's my own feelings that distress me." Léa started to cry again.

"Do you know what they are?" she gently prodded.

Léa shook her head.

Madame Villeneuve brought her arm around the girl and pressed her head to her shoulder. "There, there. These things have a way of becoming cloudier before they're seen as clear as day."

"Do you think so?"

“Indeed. Why don’t we dress you so you can take a turn in the clean air for a bit, then Lambert can see about fixing that window.”

“Will Audric be in the garden today, do you think?”

“No, I imagine he’ll keep to the house until his mother and sister return. Now, before I forget, he asked if I would deliver this to you.” She pulled a note out of her pocket and handed it to Léa, who sat up to take it. She ran a thumb over it.

“Thank you, Madame Villeneuve,” Léa smiled appreciatively.

“You’re welcome, my dear.”

After dressing, Léa made her way to the hedged garden. She didn’t want to see anyone, not Audric, not even Lisette, and especially not Duchesse d’Aramitz. She opened the note and read it, Audric asked her to meet him in this very spot in three hours’ time. Léa took that time to wrestle her own heart, but found she was no closer to understanding it than she had been all night.



Everyone returned in high spirits. Audric didn’t waste any time in telling his mother and Lisette what he was going to speak to Léa about, and requested that they stay out of the garden at that time. He headed that way himself a little early, intending to prepare himself, but instead found Léa there already. Nerves suddenly took over. He clenched his hands and sent a silent prayer to heaven for peace. He cleared his throat and approached her from behind.

“Hello, Léa,” he managed.

She turned to face him and he noticed she seemed uneasy as well.

“Good morning, Audric,” her words were quiet.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Well enough,” she answered simply.

“Um, shall we sit?” He gestured toward the bench and they sat down.

“I realized the other day just how long you’ve been here already.”

“Nearly eight months,” she answered flatly.

“Indeed. Lambert reminded me that we have not yet been married...” he quirked his head to the side.

She smiled and turned her head down, “You needed to be reminded of that fact, Audric?”

He exhaled, “No, I don’t suppose so. But I did need to be reminded—pushed really—that I needed to remedy that fact.” He looked at her anxiously and hastened to continue, “Not that I didn’t want to remedy it, I just, well, I wasn’t certain for a time.”

She lowered her head again but didn’t smile, there was something in her demeanor that was beginning to worry him, something was amiss.

He lifted her chin gently, “But I’m certain now that, if you are willing, the time is right for us to marry.”

“Yes, I agree,” her words were affirming but her tone was low and she wouldn’t make eye contact with him.

“Léa, will you not look at me? Is this not what you want?”

She stood up quickly and walked a few paces, wrapping her arms around herself, half turned her head and said, “Of course, it must be so.”

He moved his mouth to speak then stopped. Standing up, he came behind her. At the touch of his hand on her shoulder, she turned and he gently placed his hands on her arms, “I hope you know how much you’ve come to mean to me. For all my bumbling words, I didn’t mean to make you think that I was forced into this.” He laughed lightly, but her face didn’t change. His brows came together as he lowered his hands and took a step back.

“Please tell me what’s wrong. Is it about last night? I...I wasn’t sure that you would feel the same way for me as I do for you, but I had come to believe that this wouldn’t be received as...unwelcome. I thought you’d come to care for me at least a little.”

“I have. I do care for you very much. I’m not upset about last night, you were honoring to me in all you said and did.” Léa brought a hand to her face then ran it down her throat as she turned her head and struggled to find the words to say how she felt.

“I have waited for you to ask me and prepared my heart to hear the words you’ve spoken today, but now that you have spoken them, I find I’m not as prepared as I’d thought.” Her last words came out choked. She searched desperately for what she could say that would hurt him the least, he deserved better than this, and he had to know why she felt the way she did.

“It’s true that I came here of my own choice and that I wanted a better life for my family. Everything I told you was true. But, the better life that I was giving them was that my father would be kept out of prison.”

“On what charges?” He wasn’t quite following yet.

“Trespassing, poaching, and thievery,” she stated bitterly. “For stepping a foot on Rousseau land, for losing his way as he hunted on our own, and for taking a single rose—for me no less.”

Understanding was beginning to dawn. He turned his head away and rubbed the back of his neck. “Business with her father,” he said under his breath.

“I don’t count my father blameless, Monsieur, but he did nothing worthy of such heavy charges. I promise you he did not know the rumors about you then, he had no knowledge of what he was risking for you.” She could barely speak as the tears began to form.

At her “monsieur” his stomach lurched and he felt winded.

“I believe you,” his words felt hollow.

“You may not have been forced into this, but I most certainly was! And, of course, I’ll gladly marry you for my father’s sake, but it would seem my heart is rebelling just now, rebelling against every word your mother spoke against my family, against every time she reminded me of my place and her power over me, for every time I feared for my father even though I’d done everything I was supposed to.” She heaved a ragged breath as the words that had built up for eight months came flooding forth unbidden, and with every word a blow to Audric’s heart.

They both stood silent for several moments, all Audric could hear was his own heart beating. Finally, his voice broke the silence, “Léa, I’ve been told that you might not be well received were you to return home now unwed. You would know better than I. Knowing this, would you still return home if you could, without repercussions from the Rousseau estate?”

She couldn’t reply, but Audric caught the briefest glimmer of something cross her face—hope. The smallest whimper escaped his throat and he turned away from her. He fingered the tip of a branch on the rose bush in front of him, trying desperately to hold the floodgates of mounting emotions inside him closed.

“You are free to go, I will not hold you here. Everything given to your family they may keep as reparation for grievances made against them. Your father will not be held to account for anything he has done or not done.”

Léa’s head spun and a great swirl of conflicting emotions ran through her. “Audric,” she paused, trying to grasp this sudden change of events. “I...” She couldn’t finish the words that she knew would ease his heart, not this time. “And your mother?” she said instead.

“I will deal with her,” his voice was stone. Léa had never known him to sound angry until now. She came up behind him. “Audric, I...have truly enjoyed our time together and do care...”

“Please stop,” his voice was full of anguish and he turned his head only slightly. “Just go...may you live a happy life.”

Léa reached out a hand but stopped short of touching him. Pulling her hand back, she turned to run softly away. Only then did he turn, watching her slip out of the garden. His breathing grew constricted and his vision blurred. Rubbing frantically at his eyes to clear them, he turned and staggered to his knees. Leaning against a bench, he groaned as what felt like a thorny vine encircled his heart and squeezed tight around it. Clutching his chest, he took in a great breath and released a single, prolonged cry that could be heard all the way to the house.

Léa, now halfway to the main gate, turned at the sound of it. She doubled over and began to weep, then turned and ran the rest of the way as tears continued to fall. She slammed into the bars of the gate and began shaking at them, yelling as she did so, “Open up, please, open the gate!”

The gatekeeper rushed out but hesitated.

“He told me to go, I promise you, he told me to go,” she cried.

He fumbled with the keys and clicked the lock open. She pushed her way out and willed her feet to move as fast as they could toward home.

Back in the garden, Audric poured his heart and soul into ripping up every rose bush. He pulled at the thorny branches with his bare hands until they were torn and bloody. Lambert, Devereux, Villeneuve, Duchesse d'Aramitz, Lisette, and what seemed like the whole household burst into the garden, having heard his cry. They all rushed forward until they saw him sitting in front of the cottage, head down and his broken hands held out over his knees. Everyone looked at each other in stunned silence. The

servants and Lisette stayed where they were while the Duchesse and the senior staff approached him cautiously.

They saw the remnants of the rose bushes strewn all over the ground. His mother gasped at the sight of her son's hands. The sound of it caused Audric to look up and as she made to come near him, he stopped her.

"Don't come any closer!" he raged.

"Audric, my son, please tell me what troubles you," she began to cry softly.

He tried to look at her, but he couldn't and turned his head. "How could you?" He began to cry and his voice turned to a groan, "How could you force her hand?" Then his voice rose, "Did you think I wouldn't care under what circumstances you acquired a bride for me, that I was so desperate that I would take anyone you could snare in a trap?"

"Oh, Son!" she cried. Then her voice turned to steel, "Where is she? Where has she gone?"

He jolted forward, leaning a bloodied hand into the dirt as he looked her straight in the eyes, "You will not follow her or force her to do anything else!" He fell back to sitting as he was before. "I have released her from her cage. I should have done so from the start. But, I was weak—my heart, my mind, my body..." He lowered his head and sobbed. "Yes, I was desperate."

His mother took another step toward him.

"Leave me!" he shouted.

"Son," Devereux tried instead.

"Just leave me alone!" he yelled again. "Please, just leave me alone," he moaned.

They slowly trickled out. Villeneuve led a devastated Duchesse d'Aramitz away, while a dazed Lisette watched her brother until Francine and Marguerite came alongside her and encouraged her to come away.

When they were all gone, Audric lay down on his side in the dirt and curled his legs in, clutching his aching core. His hands didn't hurt like the intense pain around his heart. "Why does it hurt so much?" he whispered. *Sometimes love and pain walk hand in hand*, a gentle voice answered from inside him. "But why?" his voice was strained. *Because the greatest love gives up its own wants and needs for those of another.* "I'd

given you my hopes and dreams. Why revive the hope at all only to take it away now?" No answer. Audric groaned and curled in tighter.

When night began to fall, Devereux and Édouard returned and set him on his feet. "You have to get inside, Son, or you'll freeze," Devereux said.

"I don't care," he mumbled as he struggled to stay upright.

"I know you don't, but we do."

The two men supported him on each side and brought him to his room.

Édouard saw to his wounds, then had Villeneuve wrap his hands as he sat on the bed.

"I thought it was possible that she loved me; did I just deceive myself? How could someone like her truly love someone like me?"

"In the days to come," Villeneuve told him, "you'll likely have many questions that there won't be sufficient answers to right now. I hope you can remember through the darkness that you have people who care about you and a God who can anchor your soul."

Audric leaned his head into her middle and wept. The housekeeper lovingly ran her fingers through the back of his hair and rubbed his back. "That's right, dear boy, let it come," she soothed.

Chapter 20

Léa stumbled into the cottage. “Father! Marie? Juliette. Is anyone here?” she called as she rushed into the kitchen. She stopped up short on seeing a woman in the kitchen she didn’t recognize. “I’m sorry, who are you?” She wasn’t in the mood to mince words, she needed to find her family.

“I’m Pierre’s wife. Beauty? Don’t you remember me? I’m the baker’s daughter. Have you been allowed to visit?”

“Pierre’s wife...” she said vaguely. “Where is my father?” her voice turned urgent.

“He’s traveling. He won’t be back for another three days. But Jacques and the girls are in the main house,” she offered.

“The main house? Where is that?”

“Just go out the back and you’ll see it. I’m surprised you didn’t see it when you came up.” She smiled.

Léa rushed out the back door and, sure enough, a moderately large house loomed to her left. She plowed into Jacques as she opened the front door and bolted in, wrapping her arms around him and crying, “Oh, Jacques!”

“Beauty? What’s happened? Why are you here?”

She couldn’t answer through her tears, so he led her to a formal sitting room, but upon entering they found Juliette and Olivier already there. Olivier had his arm around her sister.

“What is he doing here?” Léa asked stiffly.

“Good to see you too, Beauty,” his voice was like oil.

Juliette stood up, “We’re engaged, Sister.” She flashed him a glowing smile, but he didn’t take his eyes off of Léa.

“Come, Beauty, we can talk in my study. There is a lot to catch you up on.” Jacques took her arm and led her around the corner to a small room set up as a study. Papers were piled neatly on a desk. It dawned on her that he was wearing a new suit of clothes. He offered her a seat and

pulled his chair up next to hers. "Tell me about you first and then we can talk about our good fortune since you left us," he encouraged her.

"There's not so much to tell," her head lowered and she started sniffing. Jacques handed her his handkerchief. She laughed, "Is it clean?" Then she covered her face with her hands and wept again. A bewildered Jacques patted her shoulder.

"What happened?" he asked gently.

"I've broken his heart," came her tearful reply. She finally lifted her face, "He sent me away when I told him about his mother's dealings with us. Don't worry, he won't require anything back and Father is free."

"But, Beauty...you...you're married to him, what will you do? Will you stay with Father the rest of your life?"

"Jacques, we were never married."

He sat back in his chair and ran a hand over his mouth and chin.

"Nothing happened, not like that. He was nothing but honorable toward me."

"Yet he's sent you away after living in his house for eight months." He leaned forward and lowered his voice, "That's not honorable, Beauty. The man's a libertine. No one will understand or believe that nothing happened."

"Please don't call him that. I've known many men who could be described that way and he's anything but that. The only reason he hasn't married me these past months is because he's *not* a libertine. He knew it would be difficult in the village, Jacques, but I...I couldn't stay when he gave me the chance to leave. I took the risk upon myself."

"I don't understand." He shook his head.

"Then trust me. I'm just happy to be here with you now. Where is Father? Why is he traveling?"

He took a breath. "A lot has happened since you left us. Father was careful with the wealth that was given us. He bought a cart and has become a traveling merchant. I'm now his clerk, I keep track of supplies and communicate with the merchants to obtain new inventory. Father gave Pierre the cottage and enough for him to hire farm hands to tend the land while he oversees it all."

"Oh, I met his wife in the cottage, have they been married long?"

"A few months," he answered.

“And you, are you married?” She was suddenly sad that she’d missed so much.

“No,” he tucked his head and smiled. “Juliette is engaged to Olivier, of course. No one is happy about that except Juliette and François.”

“What does François employ himself with?”

“Not much, I’m afraid. Father gave him a fair amount so he could get started in Paris, like he wanted, but he squandered it and came groveling back here. Marie is much the same as always, except she helps Madame Beaumont with her school now, and is a little less...volatile.”

“Dear Madame Beaumont, I must see her, she will know what I should do.”



News traveled fast in the village that Beauty was home, no doubt spread by Olivier. A knock sounded at the door early the next morning. The Du Bois’ now had a house maid, who opened the door and showed the village priest and Olivier into the formal sitting room. Jacques and Léa received them, albeit cautiously. Olivier stood while the priest sat facing the brother and sister.

“Monsieur Olivier has approached me with the details of your... confinement, Mademoiselle Du Bois. The church is prepared to forgive all if you are willing to decry Monsieur Rousseau as a fiend and no man at all,” the priest’s heavy voice droned, “Of course, you will have to do so publicly to cleanse your standing before God and man. But I trust...”

“No,” Léa interrupted.

“Excuse me?”

“No, I won’t do that. He’s not a fiend,” she repeated.

“He’s bewitched her!” Olivier exploded.

“No one’s bewitched me,” Léa’s voice rose. “Monsieur Rousseau is an honorable *man*. He’s done nothing wrong.”

“I don’t think you understand the situation, my dear,” the priest turned fatherly, “if you refuse, I cannot vouch for your virtue.”

“Fine,” Léa’s voice was even as she rose.

Jacques followed suit and the priest and Olivier looked at each other flabbergasted. They left but not without telling Léa to consider wisely before making a faulty decision.

Outside, Olivier stopped the priest, “Can we not go to the château, force him out?”

“The Rousseau family is still a prominent one, we can do nothing without proof.”

“My offer still stands. Get the girl to renounce him and marry me, and I will compensate you accordingly.”

The priest nodded in agreement. “Give her some time. She’ll see reason when she knows what life awaits a woman of compromised virtue.” He smiled despicably and Olivier laughed equally so.



Léa usually kept her head low and her eyes down as she walked through the village, but this time the tittle-tattle wasn’t about how unsociable she was. She was met with hushed whispers and suspicious stares. She quickened her pace even more and stepped into Madame Beaumont’s house with a sigh of relief. Madame rushed from her chair to embrace Léa and kiss her cheeks.

“How are you, dear Beauty?” she sounded concerned.

Léa melted into her embrace, soaking in the pure comfort of someone whose love is constant and secure. “I’m not well at all,” her voice rose and she felt like a little girl again after she’d scraped a knee. Madame brought her to the settee, feeling the girl needed the further comfort of arms around her and the usual chairs would not be sufficient.

“Oh, *mon chou*, tell me all about it, or don’t and we can just be.” She leaned her head on the younger woman’s and kissed it.

Léa smiled inwardly, Madame always knew exactly what she needed.

“I’m lost at sea and I can’t find my way to shore. You were right about Monsieur Rousseau,” she tilted her head up to look at her mentor. “He is so kind and gentle. He’s nothing more than a lonely man hidden away from a cruel world. He is highly intelligent, he’s studied so many different things and was so patient in teaching me whatever I was

interested in. Do you know, he gave me a whole library! It was truly magnificent.” She smiled at the thought. “And we could talk for hours, sometimes saying nothing at all, just content to know that the other was there. He was so thoughtful, even in the little things.” She frowned. “I’ve hurt him deeply by leaving. But I couldn’t love him the way he wants me to.”

Léa went on, “His mother was insufferable, she would often remind me of how unworthy I was of her beloved son and that should I ever cross him, she would take it out on my father. Perhaps she didn’t do so in words every time, but her actions always communicated what her lips did not. Now I don’t know where to go or what to do. I find at every turn that I will hurt someone I love no matter what choice I make. By coming home I’ve risked my family’s standing among society, and yet I couldn’t possibly betray Audric the way others want me to.”

“You know my door is always open to you no matter what they say,” she reassured her.

“I know, and I’m grateful, but even then I would cause harm. The parents of your pupils may not let their children come to the school anymore if they thought they would be influenced by someone as sullied as I am in their eyes.”

“Beauty, wait for your father to return before you do anything rash. He may be able to take you away to a new town where no one knows you or what people say of you.”

“And yet, the very idea of doing that makes me feel I will go mad! I can’t leave him. I won’t leave him alone even if I’m not with him. If only things were different. Why must the world be so cruel towards what it does not know? He is such a dear, sweet man, a better man than any I’ve known before.”

Madame Beaumont considered this for a moment, “Now you are speaking of Monsieur Rousseau again.”

“Yes, yes,” she covered her eyes and groaned.

Madame looked on her with a knowing smile, but said nothing more. Time would be the judge of whether her suspicions were correct or not.



Before Du Bois could pull his cart onto the family property, Léa raced out of the house toward him. When he looked up and saw her, he stopped and whispered under his breath, “Beauty? Is it really you?” Then he bounded out of the cart toward her, taking her in his arms and holding her close.

“*Ma Belle!* How are you here?” He moved her to arms’ length quickly. “Are you hurt? Have they done anything to you?”

“No, Papa, no. I am well, no one has hurt me.” She smiled and hugged him around the neck again. “It is so good to see you, Papa! I’ve missed you so.”

“And I you, my Beauty. But you must tell me what has happened, what does all this mean?”

“Come inside and we’ll talk.”

Pierre came out and took care of the cart and horse, while Léa and Du Bois went into the sitting room. She explained as best she could to her father, though his reaction was much the same as Jacques’.

“You’re sure he didn’t hurt you, my dear?” Her father was still shocked and confused by everything. “I will not think the less of you no matter what, you can tell me.”

“No, Father, I assure you, he could not have been more honorable in his conduct toward me.”

“Well then,” he paused and looked away, “And you will not decry the man, for your own sake?”

“I will not,” she said decidedly.

“Then we shall find a new town to live in, start fresh.”

“No, I don’t want that. You’re all settled here, I won’t disrupt that.”

“Well, then you will at least go with me on my rounds. I insist! I will not have my daughter looked down upon.”

Léa did go with him for a week, but was so despondent and unhappy that Du Bois was at a loss as to how to help her and didn’t force her to go out with him again when they returned. Two weeks passed in a state of uncertainty and indecision, but with still no further clarity.

Chapter 21

Édouard knocked and came into the room. He found Audric sitting against his bed on the floor, staring absently out the window.

"I've come to tend your hands, Monsieur, will you allow me?"

Audric nodded.

"Gabriel is here, he wishes to see you. May he come in?"

Audric hesitated, then nodded again. Édouard beckoned toward the door and little feet pattered toward them. The boy came around the side of the bed and up to Audric. He reached a little hand up and petted the man's head, then held on to a handful of Audric's hair. Gabriel popped his thumb into his mouth. Audric turned back slightly and picked up a piece of shortbread from the untouched tray on the bed and handed it to the child, then wrapped his arm around him. With unshed tears in his eyes, Audric offered his other hand to be tended. Édouard smiled faintly as he applied ointment and re-wrapped the wounded hand.



Léa hadn't slept well since she'd been back and tonight was no different. This wasn't what she'd dreamed about for eight months, this wasn't the snug little cottage she'd left when she went away. Her sisters weren't near, she couldn't hear her father's snoring from the kitchen.

She slept fitfully on and off, strange dreams filling her head. In one such dream, Audric held her in his arms, they were both dressed in grand attire fit for a ball. She looked up into his face only to find that it was like any other man's, though his looks could rival a prince's.

"Why can't you love me?" he asked.

Léa tried to explain but found she had no voice.

A clock struck midnight and, just like Cinderella, she ran away. The more she ran, the further it seemed she was from home. Turning around, she tried to run back to Audric, who stood behind the château gate reaching out for her. She reached out to him, but their fingers remained

inches apart. Distressed, she stopped running and looked back toward home, then again toward Audric. "Help me!" he cried out to her. But there was nothing she could do. The clock tower striking the hour clanged louder and louder until she clasped her hands over her ears. She awoke with a start, calling out for Audric. Sweating and panting, she looked around her elegant but nondescript room wondering where she was.

Jacques burst through the door at the sound of her cry. "What's happened? What's the matter?"

"Oh, Jacques!" she cried into his arms as he came to her on the bed and held her.

After a while, he asked, "You love him, don't you, Beauty?"

"Yes, I love him so much, but I don't know in what way."

At first light, Léa put on one of her sisters' old plain dresses and brushed out her hair but didn't braid it. She wrapped a shawl around her and headed decidedly toward the château. It was early yet, but she stood outside the gates and waited. A carriage was ready outside the house. Lisette stepped out of the château just as the gatekeeper realized she was there.

"Mademoiselle?" he inquired.

Before she could say anything, Lisette saw her and came quickly to her but stopped short of the gate.

At the same time eager and hesitant, she said, "Léa, what are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to know how he was doing, to hear that he was in good health."

Lisette studied her face for a moment. "You're pale, have you been ill yourself?"

Léa shook her head and looked away, pulling the shawl tighter around her. "Are you going somewhere?" she asked, remembering the carriage.

"Mother wants to go to the city, to consult a physician...about Audric."

"Is he sick?" She started to worry and came closer to the gates.

The Duchesse came out of the château then and upon seeing them, began to walk toward them.

Léa spoke urgently, "Please just tell him that I think of him often."

"No, Léa, that would torture him," Lisette said as she stared directly at her.

The Duchesse approached and Léa stepped back.

"What are you doing here? Haven't you done enough? Go home, Mademoiselle," the Duchesse demanded, then guided Lisette back to the house with her. Lisette turned her head to Léa, but said no more.

Léa stood numb in front of the gates, her heart twisted for what Audric must be thinking and feeling right now. A deep longing rose within her to climb the gates and go to him, but she also knew that she couldn't be the cause of more pain if she had no new answer for him. Her hand trembled as she brought it to her face. What should she do now? Reluctantly, she turned toward home, though it felt like home no longer.

It had been long since sleep was an escape for Audric. At first it numbed the pain and gave him a few hours of peace, now if it did actually overtake him, it only added to the torture. As he slept restlessly now, he found himself in an empty room surrounded on all sides by taunting hideous demons. Each one would call out to him, "Animal," "Detestable," "Unworthy," "Unloved." Audric turned around the circle frantically, trying to find a friendly face. Then another voice spoke as if inside him, it was Léa's. She said, "Human. Cherished. Respected." Her voice turned to a whisper, "Loved."

With each word she spoke a demon would vanish. Then she herself appeared before him and he reached out to her only for her to vanish like mist. Then a shadow grew in her place and another hideous face came right before him and screamed, "Rejected!" and laughed with a witch's cackle.

He awoke with a sharp intake of breath and the emptiness he'd felt since Léa left hit him full force in the pit of his stomach. He sat up and pulled the Bible sitting on his bedside table over to him. He read some psalms, King David's laments. "I am weary with my groaning; All night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with my tears." He read about God as the rejected husband. He read of his Savior, suffering pain for those who did not return his love. Though the cloud remained and the darkness insulated him, the words were like a balm that held the pieces of his heart together for one more breath, one more heartbeat.

Chapter 22

Francine carried yet another untouched tray into the kitchen. Cook came over to the table to examine it. "He's still eaten nothing!"

"He's wasting away for love sickness," Francine sighed.

"It's been three weeks! We must find a way to get something in him."

"I've done all I can, he will only take the water, not even the tea or wine."

"Lisette. Has Lisette tried?"

"I think she's afraid to try. The Duchesse has given up trying since the doctor said there was nothing to be done for him, and has kept the girl away as well."

"Perhaps when the Duchesse is gone, we can persuade Lisette to try. If he'll listen to anyone, he'll listen to her, or at least let her in the door!"

Duchesse d'Aramitz was on her way out. She had given extensive instructions to the servants and now had only to persuade Lisette to do as she bid as well.

"Are you sure you shouldn't stay, Mother, he will come around eventually. He must," Lisette asked her mother as the lady put on her hat and gloves to leave. Lisette didn't think it wise to leave him in his current state.

"I can't stay any longer. I can't bear to see him like this, and he can't even bear to look at me. Are you sure you won't return to your aunt's with me? She has been expecting you."

"I don't want to return, Mother, especially not now. Even if he won't see me, I need to stay. But you should take Beatrice back with you to Aunt, she misses Paris and I don't need her any longer."

"Very well. Be sure to write and let me know the moment he comes around. All this fuss over a simple village girl. I don't see how I've done

anything so very wrong, and it kills me to see him pining away over it.” She took in an exasperated breath.

Lisette gaped at her mother in disbelief. Her voice rose, “Don’t you see, he loves her! I don’t understand how you still don’t see the problem, Mother!”

“I warned him about such foolish notions of love. It would only lead to disappointment. But I suppose it’s only understandable that he would be blinded by emotions for the first girl he’s ever known.”

“Mother, will you never understand that Audric is only capable of giving the kind of love that goes well beyond mere feelings? Are you even aware that there is such a love?”

“I am well aware of the kind of love my son is capable of, Lisette, but he’s clearly wasted it on a woman who wasn’t worthy of it.”

“Perhaps it is best for you to go,” Lisette responded under her breath and crossed her arms.

Duchesse d'Aramitz lifted her chin. “Goodbye, Lisette,” she said with finality.

After she was gone, Francine and Cook beckoned Lisette over to them from the direction of the kitchen. Lisette checked out the door one more time then trotted over to them. “You have a plan?” she asked them knowingly.

“No plan, I’m afraid, just you,” Cook pushed the tray into her hands and gestured toward the stairs.

Lisette took a deep breath and nodded her head, then bravely walked up the stairs to her brother’s room.

She shifted the tray to one arm and knocked. No answer. She opened the door slowly and peeked her head in. The room was dark but she could see Audric's outline where he sat with his back to her on the bed.

“Brother?” She set the tray down and sat gingerly beside him on the bed.

He turned his head slightly, but seemed to be in a daze. Lisette reached over and fingered the edge of his untucked shirt, she wasn’t sure her touch would be welcome just now.

“Tell me to hate her and I will,” she ventured.

“Mother or Léa?” he said without turning.

“Either.” She was just happy to hear his voice.

“I would not have you hate either,” his voice was hoarse from disuse, and he tried to clear his throat.

“Are you thirsty?” She stood back up to fetch the tray.

“Just water,” he managed.

“There is no water on this tray, how about tea?”

He turned his head to her some more and nodded. This was progress. She came around to hand him the teacup and noticed how worn he looked. He took the cup with shaking hands.

“Why won’t you eat? It won’t bring her back to waste away.”

“I’m not hungry,” he answered vaguely.

“Will you let me open the curtains, Audric? It’s so dark,” she asked.

“If you must,” his voice betrayed no emotion.

Lisette pulled one back slowly. He flinched and turned his face. She opened the other and their eyes began to adjust. As she saw him more clearly, she could hardly believe how gaunt he’d become.

“Please will you eat something, Brother? Even a little.” She didn’t want to push him too fast or he might make her leave, but she also wanted to take this opportunity to meet as many needs as she could.

“Do you think she could have loved me if Mother hadn’t have interfered as she did?”

“Well,” she considered, “if I were to say that your winning charm and dashing good looks would naturally have been enough, you wouldn’t be convinced would you?” she teased.

He blinked over at her as if seeing her for the first time. She’d gotten his attention.

“I suppose if that wouldn’t be enough, I can offer you another thought,” this time she was serious. “I’ve been reading the Scriptures you gave me and it says in a particular place that fear has no place in love because ‘perfect love casteth out fear.’ Something about fear causing torment. So, if Léa were afraid while she was here, and I saw it in her myself at times, it stands to reason that her heart had no room for the love you had to offer. And, of course, your love was enough to drive out her fear—her fear of you—but it was Mother’s power over her that caused her fear.”

He furrowed his brow, the wheels began to turn, and the fog began to lift. He stood up weakly and came over to her. "You've got a head on your shoulders, haven't you, Sister?"

She smiled wide, "It's always been there, have you never noticed?"

"I guess I was too distracted by your mouth and how it never stopped moving," he returned.

Lisette exploded in a chorus of laughter and snorting. "If you weren't in such a state and I weren't so pleased to hear you speak, I would make you pay for that." She wagged her finger at him.

"Lisette, listen," he took her shoulders, "I have a thought. If I were to go to her, in her own home, where she is at liberty to accept or refuse me without the fear of our mother's wrath, that, that..." He stopped and rubbed his eyes.

"When was the last time you slept?" she asked tenderly.

"I don't know," he shook his head to try and clear it.

"But, Audric, you can't go out to her, it's too dangerous—"

"I must!" he interrupted. "I must, or I will go mad! I've repeated every word she said over and over in my head and I can't just accept this without trying," his voice grew desperate.

"And if she still doesn't accept you...what then?" she asked.

He turned and ran a hand through his hair. "Then I must move on—I shall...move on." He turned back to her and waited for her response.

"Well, then, I'm going with you."

"No, no, that is out of the question." He shook his head.

"No one will have any reason to harm me and you will need someone to speak for you until we find Léa."

He hesitated, then said, "Promise me you'll leave at the first sign of trouble, no matter what? If anything should happen to you on my behalf..."

"I promise."

He nodded his head. "Very well, when can you be ready?" He looked around for his coat as if he would leave right then.

"Audric." Her tone made him turn.

"What?"

"You can't go like this, your own mother wouldn't hug you, you stink so bad. Take a bath, brush your hair. Eat something for pity's sake!"

He walked over to her and hugged her especially tight then said,
“You’re right, I shall.”

She cringed. “Ah, Audric! Now I shall have to bathe too!”

Chapter 23

Cook was impressed when Lisette brought the tray down empty. The girl made no mention of their plans but went searching for some key items. She returned to Audric's room half an hour later to find him clean, groomed, and smelling much more pleasant. The girl set her finds on the bed, then showed them to him.

"I've gathered a couple needful things." She picked up a dark cloak. "One of Father's old hooded cloaks, we don't want to draw unnecessary attention. Also the key to the side gate."

"How did you manage to get that?" he asked, impressed.

"I have my ways," she gave him a sly smile. "Are you ready?"

He took in a deep breath, "Yes, I think so."

They made their way to the side gate, careful not to be seen by anyone. Upon entering the woods, they realized they didn't know exactly where Léa's home was, other than that it was adjacent to their own. They decided to stay hidden in the woods while keeping the main road in sight, hoping that would lead them to a nearby cottage where they could inquire further. As it happened, by following the road, they ended up exactly where they wanted to be.

Standing at the edge of the forest, they observed a small cottage at the front of the homestead and what looked to be a newly constructed manor house beyond that. Audric took a guess that newly acquired wealth would have prompted the building of a finer home, so they decided to try there first. He pulled his hood tighter around him and turned his back to the door as Lisette approached and knocked.

A young maid opened the door and inquired who she was there to see.

"Yes, is Léa at home?"

"Léa?" The maid was perplexed, "There is no Léa here."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Lisette turned to her brother, who turned his head slightly.

“Ask for Beauty,” he said under his breath.

She remembered the man at the gate had called her that. “Is there a Beauty here?” she tried again.

“Would you step into the sitting room, Mademoiselle?” The maid began to look at the hooded man suspiciously.

“Thank you, we’ll be fine to wait here.”

“Very good, miss,” her voice held little warmth.

They waited a few moments, then a young man stepped out of the door, followed behind by a woman who looked like Léa only with a narrower face and sharper features. Lisette recognized the man as Léa’s brother.

“Can I help you?” he asked with a wary frown on his face. When he looked more closely at Lisette, his face softened in recognition. “Mademoiselle Rousseau?”

“Yes, you’re Léa’s brother, right? I mean Beauty! I recognize you.”

“Yes, Jacques, and this is our sister, Juliette,” he gestured to the woman behind him then gazed over at the man whose back was to them with a grim, questioning look.

Lisette noticed and knew she’d better make this fast. “Is Beauty not at home?”

“No,” he drew out the word and paused. “Monsieur Rousseau?” He turned his attention to the hooded man.

Audric lifted his head and turned it to the side sharply, his face still covered by the hood. Juliette perked up at the insinuation with sudden curiosity. Lisette began to panic, she didn’t know whether Jacques would regard her brother favorably or not.

Jacques noticed Lisette’s fear and felt for her. A mixture of emotions hit him as he realized who was standing before him. He knew how Beauty felt about the man, and that she had nothing but good things to say about him, but he was still mixed up with his sister’s misfortunes.

“What are you doing here?” It wasn’t intentional, but his voice held a slight animosity to it.

“Please!” Lisette stepped toward him, “Jacques? We mean no harm to Léa, we just need to talk to her.”

Jacques turned his head to the side, contemplating what he should do. Finally, he nodded his head.

“Very well. She’s in town, at a Madame Beaumont’s house.”

Lisette glanced back at her brother, uncertain, then asked, “My brother cannot be seen in town, is there another way?”

“There is a way that avoids the square and is more...discreet. I can take you myself.”

“You are so kind, would you excuse me just a moment?” She turned to her brother and spoke in a low voice, “You can’t go to town, it’s too dangerous.”

He thought for but a moment then said, “I know, but this may be our only chance.”

Lisette reluctantly turned back to Jacques, fear beginning to niggle in her mind. Everything told her this was a bad idea. The thought struggled within her for a moment, then she looked intently up into Jacques’ face.

“You risked your life once to see your sister, and now my brother wants to risk his to do the same, can I trust you?”

Jacques studied her face for a moment. “If you can promise me that your brother will cause no harm to come to my sister, then I promise I will do nothing to bring harm to him.”

“Fair enough, I promise. We have an understanding then?”

Instead of answering, he turned to Audric, “Monsieur Rousseau, my sister speaks very highly of you, but I’m not convinced as of yet. Do you promise me the same thing your sister just has?”

“I do, with all my heart,” he answered with feeling.

“Then we have an understanding.” He looked back to Lisette, who nodded her head.

“Let’s move quickly then,” she replied.

Juliette followed them all at a distance, keeping her eyes locked on Monsieur Rousseau. He held his hood close around his face as they made their way to the village. Jacques and Lisette took the lead, the girl for once not saying a word. When they arrived at Madame Beaumont’s house and the maid gave them entrance, Juliette left them without anyone noticing she was gone. When everyone was inside, Jacques took the liberty of bolting the door. Audric hung back in the shadow of the entryway while Jacques and Lisette moved a few paces forward.

Léa sat on the settee with Marie, and Madame Beaumont was in her usual chair. They rose when they heard the sound of visitors. When

Léa saw Lisette step forward with Jacques, she rushed toward her and embraced her in a warm hug.

“Lisette! I’ve missed you so much. What are you doing here? Is it Audric?” Her chin began to quiver.

“No, Léa, he’s here...” She stood aside and Audric came forward slowly. His breath caught at the sight of her. She hadn’t left his thoughts for the past three weeks, but to see her face, to hear her voice...

Jacques and Lisette moved to join Madame Beaumont and Marie a few steps away. Léa covered her mouth with her hands and a sob escaped her throat.

“Audric, why did you come here? You risk your life by being here,” anxiety gripped her.

“I would risk anything to see you again,” he said breathlessly, “to tell you how *desperately* I love you.” He stepped out of the shadows and lowered his hood.

Marie gasped and Jacques took a step back. Madame put a hand to her mouth, then lowered it smiling, it was just as she thought—a different kind of man but still a man.

Léa first noticed his hands as he lifted them to his hood. “Audric, your hands, what has happened to them?” She took one of them into hers to examine it, fresh scars covered them, a few going up the inside of his arms.

He took her hands and held them to his chest, he didn’t want to let go of them again. “That doesn’t matter now...” he began. She looked into his face, seeing the dark circles around his eyes and exclaimed, “You’ve been unwell!” Her hand lifted to his face as she tenderly ran her fingers over his brow and down close to his eye. Her touch made his thoughts scatter, but he had to say what he’d come there to say. He took her hand back and waited until she was paying attention again.

“Léa, my love, listen to me. I’ve come here because I must speak to you. I can’t let another day pass, another hour even, without telling you this. I know,” he lowered his head and closed his eyes, then opened them again, and said decidedly, “I know that you see me as some lost child that needs to be cared for. It’s in your nature to care for others that way, and I love you for it, but that’s just it. I love you. And I can’t live the rest of my life hidden away without knowing that you know that. There could never

be anyone more perfect for me than you.” He paused and let out a breathy laugh, “And...it may be...that there’s not another man out there better suited to give you so fine a library.”

Lisette made a disgusted groan and rolled her eyes, but Léa threw her head back and laughed joyously. Audric sobered again, “So, even if from this point forward you want nothing to do with me,” he had to stop. He brought her hands up to kiss her fingers, “Even if you want nothing to do with me, I will honor that.”

“Audric, I’ve been so unhappy without you,” she began, and Audric’s heart flipped as he breathed in a tearful breath. “I have to apologize for how I spoke to you in the garden that day, I know I could not have been more hurtful in what I said.”

“And what did you say that wasn’t true?”

“Yes, but to direct those words to you in response to what you were asking, it was not how a true friend should behave, and I can’t tell you how sorry I am for the pain I caused you.”

“I know why you said them, and I understand, I do not blame you,” he spoke softly. “I would bear the pain again if it meant your freedom.”

Léa smiled at his words full of love.

“I’ve been so confused by my own thoughts and feelings, and I know you’ve felt it as you struggled to interpret what I was showing you in my words and actions. And now that I’ve been without you, I truly believe that I...”

Before she could say anything further, someone banged on the door. The handle of the door jiggled and more banging followed.

“Open up, we know the beast is in there!” Olivier shouted through the door.

Léa turned to Madame Beaumont. “What do we do? Is there another way out?”

“The kitchen!” she urged them.

Everyone rushed to the kitchen, but they heard voices outside the door before they reached it. They all turned to each other, fear and uncertainty gripping each of them.

“Jacques,” Audric turned to the other man calmly, “Would you be so good as to see that my sister is safe as well as your own?”

“Of course,” he gave him a solemn nod of understanding.

“No, no, I know what you’re going to do,” Lisette moved in front of him in a panic and grabbed the front of his cloak. “There must be something, *something* else we can do!”

“All of you stay here until the crowd is dispersed, hide if you need to,” he ignored his sister’s words. He looked down at her and slid his finger down her nose. “You promised,” he whispered, then hugged her tight.

“Léa,” he turned to her, the banging turned into a thump as someone tried to break down the door. Léa looked toward the door, then back at him, horrified. “I can’t tell you what these past months have meant to me. Even though it was only for a little while, for once in my life the ache was gone and there was just joy.” He smiled.

Audric turned to the others and told them to hide quickly. They scrambled up the stairs, Jacques practically carrying Lisette as she wept and reached out for her brother. Léa stayed where she was.

“I’m not leaving you,” her voice was firm.

The door began to crack. There was no time to argue now, he moved her behind him as the last crack sounded and the door came bursting in along with Olivier, François, and at least a dozen other men with torches and whatever weapon they owned. Some had nothing more than farming tools—pitchforks and scythes—but all together they made a formidable crowd.

They burst in, then froze as they came face to face with Audric. A strange quiet settled on the mob. Juliette came weaving through to stand by Olivier, stopping in horror at seeing Audric without his hood.

“Juliette?” Léa spoke her name in disbelief, “Juliette, how could you?” She came around Audric, but he placed his hands on her waist and gently pulled her back to him. “Stop this, all of you!” she screamed at them. “He has done nothing that you should come in such force against him.”

Olivier heard her defend such a man and saw the man’s hands on her waist, and something turned inside him. His pride was wounded, and it was no longer just about getting what he wanted, it was about snuffing out what he couldn’t have for himself.

He came toward the pair and glared first at Audric then down at Léa. His face came within inches of hers. For a moment the anger left his

voice and it could almost be said to be tender, “You would choose a beast over me?”

“Olivier!” Juliette shouted from behind.

He ignored her and slid his hand to the back of Léa’s neck, pulling her into a kiss. Léa pushed back on his chest. Audric swiftly moved her to the side, causing her to stumble, and attempted a blow to the man’s jaw. Olivier blocked it easily and delivered a blow to Audric’s stomach instead. He doubled over, gasping for air. Léa rose and went to François. “Do something, François, get the magistrate!” she pleaded.

He spoke so only she could hear, “The magistrate is one of them, Léa. Why are you defending this animal?”

She stared back at him and said, “François, if you have any love for me at all, please try to understand and help us!”

Olivier grabbed Audric and pulled his arm behind him then shoved him forward. Two other men grabbed him by each arm and dragged him out of the house towards the town square.

“No! Stop!” Léa followed them out and pounded at their backs.

The crowd formed a circle around Olivier and Audric, blocking Léa out.

“I could kill you now, Beast, and there would be nothing you could do to stop me. But, where’s the glory in that, eh?” Olivier began to circle Audric. “Will the beast put up a fight? Is there enough man in you to make it worthwhile?”

Audric supposed these remarks were meant to make him mad or afraid, but there were two things about Audric that the seasoned hunter didn’t take into account. One was that Audric had spent most of his life questioning his manhood, so it was no great insult to call it into question now. The other was Audric’s depth of learning and intelligence. Rather than give way to fear, stores of information came to the forefront of his mind as he faced his opponent.

He’d never been in a fist fight, that much was true, but years of fencing gave him a starting point. First, know your opponent. Audric sized Olivier up. *Strengths: Big, strong, purposeful movements, hunting smarts,* he thought it through. *Weaknesses: Arrogant, relies on intimidation to gain the upper hand. Yes, that’s the first move.*

Audric stood up tall and bowed, waving his arm to the side. He stared directly at Olivier and smiled, showing the man that his move to intimidate did not hit its mark.

Olivier was immediately thrown off guard and didn't know what to make of someone who wasn't afraid of him. He set his jaw and brought up his fists. "Fight, Beast!"

Next move, stance. Watch your opponent, guard your vulnerable spots. He angled himself to present his dominant side and protect his weak points. Audric kept his eyes fixed on Olivier and brought his fists up. He knew he couldn't overpower the man, he wasn't going to win this fight, but he could outsmart him enough to buy time or at least die trying.

Olivier made a predictable move and Audric easily moved to the side and deflected the blow. *Dodge, parry.* Audric's moves were deliberate. Rather than bounce around, he focused and watched, ready to make the right move. Audric smiled again and taunted him, he wanted Olivier to make a big move. He took the bait and brought his arm back to punch hard. At the exact moment he let his fist fly, Audric shifted to the side and kicked the man in the back of the knee causing him to stumble. The momentum of the attempted blow made him lurch forward even more, leaving him vulnerable for an instant. Audric smacked him hard in the ear with the back of his hand.

"Flick!" he yelled and laughed triumphantly.

Olivier stood up and turned, holding his ear and wondering what just happened.

A few of the villagers snickered and one called out, "He just boxed your ear like you were a naughty boy!" and several men laughed in amusement.

Olivier's face clouded, then he laughed too as if he were in on the joke.

"A boy's move, more like!" Olivier burst out. He brought his fists up again, though he was more wary now. He tried his old techniques again. "Tell me, Beast, what was it like to be so near a real woman like Beauty and not be a man?"

Audric thought about his opponent's fallback move of trying to anger him in this way and thought it might not be a bad move to use in defense. Emotion was good, it meant he would make mistakes. Olivier was

stuck on berating his manhood, it stood to reason that it was something he took pride in himself.

“It was quite pleasant, actually. But a real man would not bring a lady’s name into a fight. No, only a fool with no real connection to the lady would do that.”

Olivier gritted his teeth and stalked toward him. Audric ducked down and slipped behind him, kicking him into the fountain. The crowd made no attempt to hide their laughter this time.

Olivier stood and shook his wet hair back. Something shifted in his gaze and he circled Audric with eyes full of hate. Audric went on as he moved slowly around in response, continuing to watch his every move, “I wonder what one would call a hunter who was bested by a beast...the master *hunted*,” he laughed. “Or perhaps it would then be the beast that was praised while the man tucked tail and hid in the shadows.”

The words had their intended effect, but Audric made one fatal mistake, he overestimated Olivier’s commitment to the thrill of the hunt and gaining the glory for himself. As Olivier moved closer, one of the men in the circle approached Audric from behind. Before Audric could make his move on Olivier, the man from behind smacked him in the back of the legs with a club, causing him to fall to his knees.

Olivier approached the hunched man and bent down, pulling back his head by the hair. He knew one vulnerable spot that Audric could not outsmart him out of hitting, “You love her, Beast? I shall *relish* having her while you watch on helpless, and you *will be* another animal defeated by the master hunter,” he sneered and released him as he started to walk in Léa’s direction. Weeks of little nourishment had weakened Audric considerably, but he gathered every fiber of his being into one last surge of energy as he rushed into Olivier’s back, knocking him to the ground as a primal yell escaped him. This time he landed a punch to the side of the man’s head and kept on for a few more blows before men pulled him back from behind. He grunted and struggled against them. Olivier rose slowly and shook his head to clear it, then turned back to Audric with a face of pure evil. He growled and punched him hard in the stomach twice. Audric staggered to the ground coughing and wheezing. Olivier brought a heavy boot down on Audric’s arm. -*Crack*- Audric cried out in pain. With his boot still on his arm, the hunter kicked back at his shoulder. -*Pop*- Audric

fell back and moaned, his movements slow as he tried to roll over. Olivier nodded to the men behind them who grabbed Audric up again while Olivier beat him blow after blow.

When Olivier had enough, the men dropped Audric, bruised and bleeding, to the ground. They began kicking him and ripping at his hair. When they were satisfied, the crowd let up and milled about. Léa, finally able to break through the crowd, rushed to Audric's lifeless body and pulled him gently into her arms as she cried. Olivier saw her from where he stood and a familiar glint came into his eyes. He started toward her, until François blocked his path.

“Stand aside, François,” Olivier gave him a condescending huff.

“No. You’ve tormented my sisters long enough,” François finally had a fire burning inside him. Without warning, he plunged into Olivier, knocking him to the ground. He didn’t give him a chance to react, he threw his fists into the man right, right, right, and left, pounding harder and harder. Everyone around them watched in stunned silence, not sure whether to intervene.

A wagon came rolling in filled with armed men with muskets, diverting François’ attention, and giving Olivier the chance to push out from under him to stand up. His nose streaming with blood, he grunted and leaned against a nearby villager then took a blunderbuss from his hands and turned to François.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, young man,” Devereux called from atop the wagon, aiming a musket at Olivier.

“No one can best the hunter,” Olivier laughed, then spun his weapon towards Devereux. An explosion sounded and Olivier lurched and dropped to the ground, shot through the heart.

“None but a soldier, my boy,” Devereux answered grimly, setting down his weapon and hopping out of the wagon along with the passel of armed servants.

The men fanned out keeping the hushed mob at bay, though they suddenly lost their taste for violence now that they were opposed and their leader was down. Devereux gently knelt beside Léa as she held Audric in her arms, sitting in a half daze.

“I’m afraid you’re too late,” she sniffed, “I think he’s gone.”

Devereux cradled his master's neck in his hand and bent down close. "There may be some life in him yet, my dear," he answered calmly. "Let's get him home and see what can be done." He lifted the younger man and carried him to the wagon.

Léa rose and came to François who still stood to the side. She hugged him and wept for a moment. He placed his hand on her back, he wasn't used to feeling affection for his sisters. Léa pulled away and joined Devereux and Lambert on the bench of the wagon, while the rest of the men hopped into the back and held Audric steady as they jostled back to the château.

The townspeople began to disperse. A handful took away Olivier's body. Soon no one was left in the square but François and Juliette. They turned to each other, equally lost. Finally, François wrapped his arm around Juliette and led her home.

Chapter 24

Devereux and Édouard set to work immediately once Audric was brought to his bed. Villeneuve and Francine scrambled about with bandages and hot water, along with other doctoring essentials.

“Should not a surgeon be called?” Léa asked, even though they seemed to know what they were doing.

“No, I’m afraid no surgeon can be called, but Édouard will do what he can,” Villeneuve patted her arm then left the room to gather more supplies.

Together Édouard and Devereux managed to remove the cloak then Édouard ripped open his master’s waistcoat and shirt. Léa suddenly felt shy at seeing Audric’s, very hairy, yet bare chest and looked away. She couldn’t bring herself to leave without knowing how he was first though. Édouard felt along each side of Audric’s rib cage, then down his legs and arms, checking for broken bones. He examined his face then bent down to listen closely to his chest and breathing.

He turned to Devereux and spoke quietly, “Several ribs broken, his right arm is broken, here,” he pointed, “It will need to be set. The same arm is out of joint. His nose by some miracle is not broken but badly bruised as is of course the rest of him. They’ve ripped out his hair in several places as you can see, the animals,” his voice was harsh. Devereux nodded then stopped first at Villeneuve, who had returned, and said, “*Émilie, s’il vous plaît*, we need rods, this length.” He measured the length with his hands and she nodded and went in search for what was needed. Next he came around to Léa.

He took her by the shoulders. “My dear, I won’t lie to you, it is bad. Especially since his body was already weak from lack of care the past few weeks.” Léa looked over and noticed for the first time how thin Audric was since the last time she’d seen him. Devereux continued, “Édouard apprenticed with a surgeon for a time and I have some battlefield experience. We have been in charge of the master’s care for years, so we

will patch him as best we can and the rest will be up to him. But, we have much to do and it is not something you'll want to see. I promise someone will find you when we are finished."

She nodded her head absently and turned to go. As she wandered down the hall, she realized she was in the west wing again, forbidden ground. Where was Duchesse d'Aramitz? Now that she could see with several lamps lit, she noticed the beautiful paintings of various size and subject that lined the walls. She stopped in front of several medium-sized portraits. One was of a man who could easily have been Audric, with the same shape of the face and eye color, though with normal amounts of hair. He was handsome, with distinguished cheekbones and straight Grecian nose. His dark hair had an attractive semi-curl to it. Down the line was a younger Duchesse d'Aramitz, then a boy, this was Audric. Next to his was a portrait of a baby in a flowing white gown, Lisette, surely. She came back to the first one. It must be the father.

She finally made her way to the library and found Lisette curled up on the settee, weeping, while Jacques had his arm around her. When Léa came in, relief washed over his face at the sight of her. He pressed Lisette's shoulder, and she lifted her head. The girl ran to Léa and they embraced long and hard.

"Is he dead, Léa?" she whimpered.

"No, not dead, but badly injured. He is being attended to now." They returned to the settee and sat down with Jacques. Léa reached out her hand for Jacques' and squeezed it, "Thank you," she mouthed over Lisette's head. Jacques smiled tenderly and nodded his head.

"Where is Marie and Madame Beaumont?" Léa asked with concern.

Jacques answered, "They are at home with Father. We went there first when the crowd took Monsieur Rousseau away. Then we took a horse and rode here to fetch help. We've been waiting for news since."

"It's all my fault, Léa," Lisette cried, "I knew he shouldn't have gone to the village, I knew he shouldn't..." A wracking cry of regret kept her from finishing.

"No, Lisette, if anyone is to blame for this it's me." She stood up and walked to the cold fireplace, tracing the images along its frame. "If I'd only stayed, if I hadn't said all those horrible words to him, if only..." she

stifled a sob. Looking over, she found Audric's coat still on the chair where he'd thrown it the night everyone was in the city. She picked it up and held it close, breathing in his scent.

Jacques squirmed and struggled with whether or not to speak, then couldn't hold it in anymore, "Stop this. Who is to blame? No one and everyone. An impossible situation was presented to him, choices were made, words were said. Were there mistakes made? Surely! But as far as I'm concerned, there's no way to look at it but to move forward from here. The man made a choice knowing full well what it entailed, and the worst has happened. Now there is nothing to be done but to hope, pray, and support him as he recovers. As a brother and as a man, I'm positive that's all he would want you both to focus on now."

They both stopped and stared at him, then burst out sobbing uncontrollably and snuggled up to him on either side.

"Yes, well, there, there," he sighed, and patted them both on the arms.



The ladies were both asleep when Madame Villeneuve came in a few hours later. Jacques roused them and they attempted to rub away the grog so they could hear what she had to say.

"My husband and Édouard have done all they can do. Monsieur is still unconscious and could be that way for some time, it would appear he took several blows to the head. Only time will tell. Once he wakes our greatest fear will be whether or not his body has enough fight left to see him through," she told them. She was clearly concerned, but it would seem nothing could break the calm that seemed to be a permanent fixture of who she was.

"May we see him now?" Lisette asked.

"Yes, you may."

As they all started for the room, Jacques hesitated, not wanting to intrude. Madame Villeneuve turned to him and said, "Why don't you stay the rest of the night, Monsieur Du Bois. I can take you to one of our guest rooms."

"Thank you, much appreciated," he replied.

Lisette turned and bowed her head in thanks and he gave her a small bow in reply.

The room had a solemn stillness to it as they entered and found the broken man lying on the bed, bandaged in several places. Lisette stopped at the door, worry and fear contorting her face. Léa turned to her and slipped an arm around her waist as they walked together to the bed, then sat on either side of Audric. Bandages were wrapped around his chest and his arm was set in a splint and bandaged. His face was splotched where hair was missing and where they had to trim to clean wounds and place bandages on his face. Swelling was already forming in multiple places there.

Neither of them said anything for a time, until Léa noticed how weary Lisette seemed.

“Why don’t you go lie down for a while? It’s late and you should get some rest,” she urged her.

“What about you? You need rest too.”

“I will soon, I’ll just stay a little while longer.”

Lisette nodded her assent and walked out wearily. Léa took Audric's hand in her own, sniffing past the impending tears.

“Why would you do this for me? Why risk so much? If only God had sent you someone more worthy of your love.” She gently laid down next to him, resting her head on his chest to hear that his heart was still beating and wrapped his arm around her. It didn’t take long for sleep to overtake her.

Sometime later a noise startled Léa awake. She sat up to find Madame Villeneuve knitting in a chair on the other side of Audric's bed.

“I hope I didn’t wake you, Dear,” she spoke tenderly.

Léa rubbed her eyes. “I must have fallen asleep. What hour is it?” she asked.

“It’s still late in the night. I thought it best to leave you be, but if you’d like to move to your room, I’ll keep watch here.”

Léa looked over to see Audric unchanged, he hadn’t seemed to have moved at all. She grew contemplative, then asked, “Do you and the others blame me for what has happened?”

Villeneuve stopped her knitting and set it in her lap. “No, no one blames you, how could we? We’ve known Audric all of his life and he’s not one to do anything by measure, especially love. He’d found something worth holding on to and he wasn’t going to give her up so easily.” She smiled at her.

Léa watched Audric again and exclaimed, “Oh, Madame, how can people be so cruel, so fearful of someone as gentle as Audric!”

“Fear turns all people into beasts. Primal instinct takes over and overrules rational thought and human compassion. People fear what is different, what is unknown.”

“Cannot that fear be overcome, somehow?”

“It can. If there is a willingness to face the unknown and make it known. But there’s an even greater force that overcomes fear.” She leaned forward and gazed deep into Léa’s eyes, “You’ve found that way, my dear.”

Surprised, she blinked and asked quietly, “What way is that?”

“Love,” she answered simply.

Chapter 25

It took two days before Audric opened his eyes. Léa stayed at the château, not wanting to leave until she knew he was out of danger. The senior staff discussed whether or not to write to Duchesse d'Aramitz about Audric's condition, but in the end Lisette encouraged them to wait until they knew one way or the other what his condition would be. Though he was awake, it took a few more days before he was alert enough to remember what happened and why he could barely move.

Léa knocked at his door on that day when he was fully awake and aware. She entered to find Lisette sitting in a chair beside his bed and Audric propped up with pillows, looking piqued. Édouard was checking on some of his wounds.

"Good morning, Audric." She stood before him uneasily, much had happened since they last spoke.

"Good morning." He took in a sharp breath and winced.

"Careful, Léa, he's in a foul mood today," Lisette warned her.

"Are you in pain?" she asked, concerned.

"Do you have to ask?" He struggled to speak, every breath brought another stab of pain.

"Do you want some laudanum? I can fetch some for you."

"No laudanum." He shook his head.

"If there isn't any here, I can go to the apothecary, it's no trouble."

"I don't want any laudanum!" he spoke sharply, then groaned and set his head back on the pillow behind him. "I'm sorry, Léa," he sighed and winced again.

Lisette explained, "Our father died after being given too much laudanum for a mild illness."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know."

Lisette eyed her brother, then turned back to her, "We know, Léa, think nothing of it."

Léa eased onto the bed. "Are you hungry?" she asked.

He nodded his head but didn't speak. She picked up a bowl of broth from a side table and fed him a spoonful. He managed one more before shaking his head.

"Audric, you have to eat to get your strength up," she urged him.

"Let Francine do it," he answered gruffly.

Léa sat up defensively, "Why Francine?"

He turned his head on the pillow, "Because she's standing behind you."

Léa turned to find Francine waiting to take the bowl from her. "Oh," she lowered her eyes. "Can I read to you?" she perked up.

"Lisette was about to do that," he answered.

"Well," she started quietly, "If I'm not wanted..." She turned to leave.

Audric grabbed her arm. "Wait," he breathed, "Wait." He looked at the others and nodded his head to the door. He waited until they were gone to continue, "It's not that you're not wanted," he strained to speak, "but why do you want to serve me?"

Taken aback by the question, her brows came together and she answered quickly, "Because you're hurt. If it weren't for me you wouldn't be lying there in pain. Because I want to help you be well."

"Yes, but why?" he asked again with feeling.

Tears stung her eyes and she abruptly stood up and left the room. She didn't stop until she came to the hedged garden. The air was cold and she hugged her arms around herself, sniffing at the sting of Audric's words. Why did it hurt for him to say that? Why did it matter to her that Francine was the one taking care of him right now?

Léa walked over to the cottage and fond memories of times they'd spent together came back to her, her birthday picnic, watching the stars, long talks about anything and everything. Turning to the rose bushes, she realized they had been torn out and the broken branches left spread out on the ground.

"No, no!" she cried, bending down to gather the pieces. A thorn pricked her finger and she sucked in a breath, then she remembered the scars on Audric's hands. He'd torn them all out! She sat back on her heels and let her tears flow.

Léa looked up to the heavens and spoke hesitantly, “Holy Father in Heaven? I’m not used to talking to you like Audric does. I don’t think I’ve ever heard your voice speak to me.” She lowered her head and wiped the tears from her cheeks. She paused. “That is, do you speak on the wind sometimes?” A gentle breeze tickled her cheek. She touched it and smiled, looking up again. “I’ve always thought to love a man meant romantic looks of longing and undeniable sparks; is it not so? All I feel right now is an ache within me, and the idea of never seeing him again...” She shook her head. “Do I love him enough to marry him? Has it been there all this time?”

She stared at the clouds for a moment, then sighed. As she turned her head down, something red at the base of the cottage caught her eye. There, growing on a remnant of a vine, was a single crimson rose. She laughed in shock. There was no need to look up this flower, she knew the meaning already: Love in full bloom.



Francine took up the now empty tray and went to the door to bring it back to the kitchen. Lisette was reading to her brother, who was still struggling with pain, but had eased slightly having something to focus on. As Francine opened the door, something fell from the outside handle. She shifted the tray to her hip and stooped to pick up the object.

“*Mais oui*, Monsieur, it is one of your flowers!” She brought it to him, before turning to leave.

“What does it mean, Brother?” Lisette asked.

He twisted it between his finger and thumb as a broad smile formed on his face. “It means I need to get better, and that you need to teach me how to dance!”

Chapter 26

Léa packed her bag that day with the things she'd left behind the first time she'd left, then went back home to her father and siblings. Audric didn't need or want her help, so there was nothing more she could do there. She thought perhaps it was for the best. She needed time—without the oppression of forced circumstances, without the pressure of needing to get away. Time to think things through and just feel whatever she naturally felt without the need of thinking of others' well-being or even her own.

Jacques went nearly every day to hear how Audric got on, though Léa soon suspected there was someone else he was going to see as well. Juliette avoided Léa at first, but whenever they did happen to cross paths, she was pensive and wouldn't look her in the eye. Finally, Léa sought her sister out and found her sitting by the well, staring out over the fields.

"Juliette?" Léa said her name as she approached.

Juliette turned. She looked down and hugged her arms around herself, feeling trapped.

"I'm sorry for what happened," Léa started. "Do you blame me for Olivier's death?"

Juliette's eyes shot up. "No! No, of course not!" She shook her head and gazed intently at her sister. "It is you that I fear blames me."

"Oh, Juliette," Léa came to her then and wrapped her arms around her older sister. "I don't blame you. Perhaps I did for a time, but I know why you did it and have only felt how much of a loss you must be feeling yourself."

Léa stepped back and Juliette quietly watched her. "I suppose I didn't love Olivier so much after all. I just loved to be admired, and that's something he never did. If I had thought about it, I would have known." She looked down and laughed without mirth. "I've caused so much harm by my vanity and jealousy, how can you be so calm and forgiving?"

Léa couldn't answer at first. She looked out over the fields and the orange swirl of clouds as the sun was setting. "I suppose," she said without turning, "I have been shown so much love myself even when I didn't return it," she turned to her sister, "that I can't help but extend that to you, even though perhaps you don't deserve it." She eyed her sister playfully and they both laughed.

After a minute Juliette grew serious, "I don't deserve it, Beauty. Do you love that...man?"

"Yes. I do," she answered confidently. "And I can't help but feel that somehow all that has happened was a part of God's plan. Not that he has been the author of the evil that was done, but that he used it for the plan he already had." They were both silent for a time when Juliette turned to her and asked hesitantly, "Do you not find him ugly?"

"Audric? I suppose I did at first, and that's partially why I didn't think I truly loved him. But now, all I see is *him*—the gentle tenderness of his touch, his eyes that pierce my soul," she laughed. "I see the depth of his love and the constancy of his companionship. His other qualities have made his appearance more attractive to me." She shrugged. "And now, I must admit, the only thing I can think of is having his warm, loving arms wrapped around me again."

"Again?" Juliette teased.

Léa blushed and gave her an embarrassed smile, "Yes, again." She thought for a moment then asked, "Speaking of undeserving, can I ask you something, Juliette?"

Juliette laughed. "Of course."

"I do love Audric, but what about his awful mother?"

"Would you marry the man or his mother, Beauty?" Juliette smirked.

"In truth? Sort of both. I can't have one without the other, I fear."

"I suppose that's part of the bargain then. Is your love strong enough to endure the storm that is his mother?" They both laughed heartily, though Léa did feel it was something worthy of consideration.



At first, Léa's absence bothered Audric. He feared the words said in pain had driven her away, but when he looked at that crimson rose fully bloomed in the middle of winter, peace would fill his heart again. As his pain slowly became more manageable, a thought came to him, which formed into words and sentences until he couldn't help but write them down. He wrote and wrote, the words flowing from him like a fountain, then like a flood.

That night he dreamed. That final demon loomed in front of him. Audric stood before it without fear and proclaimed, "Chosen." The demon cried out before vanishing away, and Audric slept peacefully for the first time in many nights.

When he was able to move some without tremendous pain, he was aided to the library on occasion. He sat and rested in front of the fire, lost in thought. Lisette and Jacques sat on the settee together, Lisette chattering away and Jacques softly playing his lute. After a while, she turned to him and asked, "Are you listening to me at all, Jacques?"

He turned to her and said, "Of course I'm listening, your voice supplies the words to my song."

Lisette beamed, grabbed his face and kissed him soundly. Caught off guard, Jacques just sat there, a stupid grin on his face. Audric laughed silently from his chair by the fire.

When he returned home, Jacques found everyone in the sitting room. He leaned against the wall, a small smile playing on his lips.

"How is Audric today, Jacques?" Léa asked him.

He didn't answer.

"Jacques?"

"Hm, what?"

"I asked if Audric was any better today."

"Oh, yes, of course. He's looking better, yes."

Marie watched him, then smiled deviously, "He's moonstruck!" And the sisters laughed.

"Look at him blush!" Juliette teased.

"They really are quite perfect for one another, one barely speaks at all and the other hardly ever stops!" Léa joined in. The girls erupted in laughter again.

“Children,” their father had warning in his voice. “Be nice.”

Léa stood up and went to her brother. “I’m sorry, Jacques, we really were just teasing. I’m truly happy for you and Lisette.”

He turned his head down and laughed through his nose, then looked up at her shyly. “Do you really think she’d be interested in someone like me?”

“Of course she would, and a fine choice at that.”

His smile widened.



The weeks passed as Audric’s body recovered, hope spurring him on to health. Before long he was able to walk without aid and then, gently, Lisette taught him to dance.

“Now, don’t look at your feet, look at me,” she told him and started humming a few notes. Instead of moving in unison, their feet collided and Lisette giggled.

“Oh, I shall never get this. I’m too much of a bumbler,” he laughed.

“You’ll get it, I promise, try again.”

They did better that time and started moving in a small square.

“I think I love him,” Lisette blurted out.

“Hm?” Audric looked up from his feet to her face. “Are you speaking of Jacques?”

“Yes,” she groaned, “is it too soon? Do you approve?”

They danced into a wider arc and he decided to spin her around and bring her back.

“Have you written to Mother about it?”

“Yes, she doesn’t seem thrilled. I don’t know how she feels about another Du Bois invading her territory, especially after one nearly broke her son’s heart. I still haven’t told her about what happened in the village. I’m afraid what she’ll do and that she might ban Léa and Jacques from seeing us again.”

“I’ve thought to write to her many times, but I’m still struggling to forgive her, and I still fear she will smother the hope that has only begun to bloom.” He stopped moving and looked at her more fully. “But Lisette, I would appreciate it if you told her to come home soon.”

She quirked her head. "Why?" she asked.

"Because I have a plan, and if it goes the way I hope it will, a wedding will follow shortly. As angry as I am at her, well, she just shouldn't miss it."

"I will then. Audric? You still haven't told me whether you approve of the other Du Bois we were just speaking of."

"Oh, yes, of course!" he shook his head in thought, "I've found him to be a very honorable and steady fellow. Wait. You think you love him, or you do love him?"

She giggled softly, "I do."

"Well, then, I'm afraid I don't know much about how long these things should normally take. I suppose I just wonder, are you a bit young?"

"Not particularly, some of my friends are married by now, and Léa and her sisters have waited longer than most. After all, Jeanne D'Arc was my age when she led an army, surely being married is easier than that."

"Hm, I don't know about that."

"You think I could lead an army, do you?"

"Oh, I'm sure you could, but anyhow, it's not a fair comparison."

"Well, perhaps we could be engaged for a time. To at least see you married and settled, then plan from there? Does that seem wise?"

"Yes, that seems a sound plan, I should think." He smiled. "And I'm truly glad to see you happy, Lizzy."

She hugged him tight, just grateful that he was alive and well. "Now, let's keep practicing. You want to dazzle her, not squash her feet."



Du Bois sought his youngest daughter out and found her sitting quietly in the forest. She'd done a lot of that of late.

"Daughter, do you mind an interruption from your old father?"

"Of course not, Papa, come sit with me."

Before he sat, he gently ran his thumb over her cheek and bent to kiss her forehead.

"It's good to have you back, my *Belle*."

Léa smiled a little sadly and went back to staring in the distance.

"Though, I fear it will not be for long," he added.

She looked back at him in question.

“Jacques told me he thought Monsieur Rousseau would want to speak to me soon and just this morning a messenger came to request my presence at the Rousseau estate tomorrow.”

Léa hid a small smile. “And will you go?”

“I’m none too pleased to visit the place again, I’ll admit, but whether I go or not depends on what you say.”

“I think you should go, Father.” She turned to face him.

“Do you now?” he said with a hint of sadness. “Will you be happy there, my Beauty?”

“Yes, Papa, very happy I think. And it won’t be like before, I don’t see why we wouldn’t be able to visit each other now, though of course Audric cannot leave.”

“And he’s worthy of you?”

“More than worthy! But you should decide that for yourself when you meet him.”

“Well, well, I shall have to do just that then.”



Devereux ushered Monsieur Du Bois and Jacques into the sitting room off the main entrance and left to announce their arrival to Monsieur Rousseau.

“I remember this room,” Du Bois announced with foreboding. “I never thought I’d return to it, if I’m being honest.”

“Now, remember what I told you, Father, and try not to be shocked when he comes in.” Jacques paced nervously.

“Why are you so nervous, boy, I thought he summoned us here to ask us something?”

“Yes, but I’d like to speak to him about something of my own, and, well, I find myself uneasy, that’s all.”

They finally took a seat and waited. Devereux opened the door fairly soon after and Audric strode in. The two men rose. Du Bois stared but made no obvious reaction. Audric extended his left arm to the man as the other was still splinted and bound.

“Sir.” He nodded. “Thank you for agreeing to come.”

Du Bois took his hand and shook it firmly.

"Please, have a seat," he motioned. Audric watched Du Bois with some uneasiness of his own. Would the man accept him after all his daughter had been through on his behalf? Since being seen by the mass of villagers, he was less concerned about being seen by Du Bois, but he was very much concerned with how he would respond to his upcoming request.

"Monsieur Du Bois, please let me first apologize to you for the pain that my family has caused you over the past months," he started. "I wasn't privy to my mother's schemes until your daughter informed me of them some weeks ago. Had I known, I would not have allowed them to proceed." Audric realized all of this would not recommend him as a suitable husband for the man's daughter now, but to not acknowledge it at all...what could he do? "I know my ignorance is a poor excuse, that I should have probed further..."

"Son," Du Bois stopped him, "what's done is done, say what you want to say."

"Yes, sir." He lowered his head and swallowed, then continued directly to Du Bois, "The truth of the matter is I've come to care very deeply for Léa over these past months. I love her. And I would be honored if you would consider allowing me to marry her." He paused. "I realize I should have done so some time ago and am aware of the discredit it has been to Léa..."

Jacques cleared his throat and shook his head.

"Right, all that to say, I'd like your blessing to propose marriage to your daughter." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Du Bois took in the young man's bearing and what his children had told him about his character. He considered his daughter's behavior of late and what she might be thinking and feeling. He also looked at the splinted arm and what the man had risked just to speak with his daughter. Finally he spoke, "Monsieur, I have heard nothing but good things about you from my Beauty as well as from Jacques. The turbulence of the past months notwithstanding, you have been very generous to my family. I am willing to give my blessing," he held up a finger, "upon my daughter's acceptance of your proposal, and as long as it is without interference from anyone. However, I must ask you, where is your mother and what will be her hand in the future of my daughter moving forward?"

“Thank you, sir.” He smiled in relief. “My mother and I have had a falling out and we have not spoken in some weeks; however, I’m afraid I will always be dependent upon her and those of my household to some extent. I am the heir to my father’s estate and title, but not being able to freely leave my home prevents me from having complete control of my own life. I cannot say my mother won’t be present, but I can guarantee you that she will have no power of decision of any sort in the life of my wife. And forgive me for saying so, but the estate is large enough that they need not see much of each other if they so choose.”

“Very well. If my daughter is willing, then I have no objections.” He extended his left hand which Audric took with vigor and a hearty smile. “Now, I believe my son has something he wishes to speak to you about as well.”

“Before we get to that—forgive me, Jacques—I have a request to make of you. Do your travels as merchant take you as far as Switzerland?”

“Not as yet, but it would not be difficult to extend my route. Why do you ask?”

“I have a commission for you, if you’re willing.”

Audric laid out his plan to the man, who agreed to the wisdom of it. Du Bois smiled and sat back as his son and soon-to-be son-in-law discussed another impending proposal.

Chapter 27

Three weeks later, all was prepared. Audric's splint was removed and, although a little weak, his arm healed soundly. His mother would return the following afternoon. A messenger was dispatched to the Du Bois household, inviting them to a dance to be held the following evening at the Château Rousseau.

A carriage was sent to receive the ladies of the house of Du Bois the following morning so they could be aided in their preparations. Marguerite was ecstatic to have so many ladies to help prepare, along with the help of a few other maidservants, of course. Juliette and Marie were in their element, Pierre's wife was a little lost, and Léa enjoyed soaking in the joy of the others. The women hadn't been there long before Lisette was summoned to her brother's room.

Audric was in a panic and needed her council. She found him sitting before the dressing table mirror.

"Lisette, thank God you're here. Please advise me, I look ridiculous." He gestured to the mirror. An attempt had been made to smooth back his hair, but there were still patches that were uneven from the village incident.

Lisette came around to face him and ran her fingers through a few places on his face.

"Have you never thought to shave, Brother?" she asked.

"Hm, Father forbade me from attempting it and I didn't understand why until I tried, against his wishes, when I was twelve. I nearly killed myself. Neither you nor I understand how a straight razor works," he sniffed. "I asked Édouard about it later on, he said there's too many crevices across the rest of the face to do it well, and my skin would likely become irritated. Needless to say, he didn't advise it."

"Hm," she thought and put a finger to her chin, then asked, "How much do you trust me, Audric?"

“Well...” he shrugged and gave her an uneasy look. “I suppose if she doesn’t love me as I am, then there’s no point in changing anything.” He let out a discouraged sigh.

She came around to his back and hugged him around the neck, “Oh, dear Brother, that is true, but is she not at this very time preparing herself, altering her appearance for you? Just let me try. I promise she will still see *you*. After all, you are more than your hair, are you not?”

“Very well,” he took in a deep breath. “Have your way, dear Sister.”

Lisette looked a little too eager as she picked up a small pair of scissors and went to work. Eventually she sought Édouard’s help with the details. It took some time, but at long last, they finished and stood in front of him admiring their work. They blocked the mirror so he couldn’t see the damage just yet. Francine came in to see how the preparations were coming along and stood before him with a shocked expression on her face.

“Is it that bad?” Audric asked.

“No, Master,” Édouard turned to Francine.

“It’s *magnifique!*” Francine squeaked and she covered her mouth with her hand in excitement.

Together, they all stepped aside to reveal the transformation.



Léa entered the Great Hall, her stomach twisting with nervousness. She hadn’t seen Audric for several weeks now and wasn’t sure he’d found her gift outside his door. If he had, she wasn’t certain whether he’d understood her meaning. She knew he’d spoken with her father, but the anticipation was playing with her nerves anyway. The servants filled the room, having been invited as guests rather than to serve. Much of her family, as well as Madame Beaumont, were standing across the room. They were talking with Audric, whose back was to her. As she approached, she noticed his hair had been neatly trimmed to the nape of his neck and lightly greased with *pommade* to capture the wave in his dark hair.

“Audric! You’ve cut your hair!” she exclaimed, smiling.

He turned and Léa’s hands shot to her mouth as she gasped and staggered back. He smiled and something fluttered around Léa’s heart.

“Oh, Audric, you’ve cut your hair.” She was completely bewildered, and pressed a hand to her stomach. Everyone behind them snickered at her surprise.

He approached her and led her away from the group a few paces, then held her arms.

Léa couldn’t keep her eyes off his face. The hair was completely trimmed down creating a thin, even layer across his face and forehead, allowing her to fully see his face for the first time. His straight nose and high cheek bones were almost exactly like the picture of his father, though Audric’s eyes were softer, and at the moment, filled with love and delight. He smiled again and her breath caught. How had she not noticed what a distractingly charming smile he had? It had always been there.

“Audric, you’re...beautiful!” she managed.

“You sound disappointed,” he teased.

“No,” she answered breathlessly, “It’s just that, I’ve discovered that I love you and I wanted you to know that I loved you as you were, but now...” she shook her head, “I’m not sure you’ll believe that I don’t just love you for your beauty.”

They looked at each for a moment then burst out laughing. He pulled her into a hug and said, “I already know, I got the message you left outside my door.” She hugged him tighter and closed her eyes. As they separated, Léa reached up and brushed her fingers along his forehead and down his cheek. “Still soft,” she whispered. Audric took her hand from his face and kissed her fingertips. The unmistakable love in her eyes, yes, love in all its fullness, overwhelmed him. He’d hardly dared to hope that this day would come before, and now he realized that his hope had to die in order for her love to bloom in full force now. Like one of his pruned-back plants. His throat closed as tears threatened, but he blinked it back, this was not a day for tears.

“Shall we dance?” He spread out his arm toward the dance floor and nodded to the servants standing in as musicians at the end of the room. The music began to play as Audric placed his hand at the small of Léa’s back. As he slid his arm around her, she relished the safety she felt, and at the warmth of her hand in his, she wondered how there could have been a time when she wasn’t attracted to this man. He rested his cheek against her

temple and she closed her eyes at the pleasure of his nearness. He led the dance smoothly, effortlessly.

Audric brushed his lips across Léa's temple. She pulled her head back gently and stopped dancing. He lowered his head, afraid she was displeased, until she pushed up on tiptoe and kissed him lightly on the lips. She laughed, it still tickled. Audric smiled and took her face in his hands to deepen the kiss. All around them, the room erupted in cheers. Audric and Léa moved apart, embarrassed but laughing joyfully.

Other couples filled the dance floor after them, Lisette and Jacques, Du Bois and Marie, Pierre and his wife, as well as a score of servants. Juliette found herself without a partner, so she pulled François into the fray.

As they continued to dance, Léa noticed Édouard and Francine dancing together.

"Oh! Édouard and Francine, wouldn't they make a lovely pair?" Léa remarked.

Audric tried to hide a smile, "Yes, yes, they would."

"I was jealous of her, you know."

"Oh? Why would you be jealous of Francine, my love?"

"Young love can sometimes be hard to forget." She gave him a teasing smile and shrugged a shoulder.

"Ah, well, I think Édouard might have something to say about that." He smirked, humor dancing in his eyes.

"Why do you say that?"

He chuckled, "Édouard and Francine have been married for several years, I thought you would have caught that by now. You met their five children, in fact, when we visited Grand-mère Helene."

"Five! Well, now I feel foolish," Léa laughed at her error, then wrapped both her arms around Audric's neck. "Well, I for one am glad to hear it!" she told him.

He laughed again and hugged her, kissing her cheek. "Do you mind my asking now, what else Grand-mère Helene whispered to you that day?"

Gazing lovingly into his eyes, she said, "She wanted me to give you a chance because she said you had so much love to give. And she was right!"

“She was right about a lot of things, wasn’t she?” He pondered that further, then looked around. “Come, there’s something I have to do.” Taking her hand, Audric led her to the grandmother who had been more intuitive than anyone had given her credit for.

Devereux and Villeneuve, along with a few grandchildren, were all gathered close to where the older woman was sitting. Audric approached the group and shook Devereux’s hand, hugged Madame Villeneuve, patted a few heads, then knelt in front of Grand-mère Helene herself.

“Grand-mère,” he said as he brought her hands to his face, “I finally took your advice and got that haircut.”

The old woman laughed cheerfully, “Yes, that’s better! And you all thought I was crazy!”

Everyone looked at each other and laughed as well. Devereux bent down and kissed her cheek, “You were absolutely right, Mother, we should have listened to you.” He let out a deep belly laugh.

Léa hugged her around the neck and told her, “You were right about everything, Grand-mère.” The older woman squeezed her tight.

“I’m glad to hear the happiness in your voice, young one,” she answered and patted her back.



Duchesse d'Aramitz arrived expecting to swoop in and save the day, ready to be received back with open arms and repentant hearts. Instead she found no one to greet her as she stepped down from the carriage. The footman had to open the front door for her, and she stepped in finding Devereux nowhere to be seen. “Highly unusual!” She huffed and went to the nearest service bell, rang it once and waited. Nothing. She rang it twice, more vigorously than before, to no avail.

Finally, she went looking for someone, anyone to scold for abandoning their post. As she stalked around, she thought she heard something—voices and laughter. She entered the Great Hall and gawked in wonder at the spectacle of servants and people she’d never seen before dancing as if it were a holiday. Wait, she did know these people. She squinted and discovered that several Du Bois’ were among the dancers.

Audric signaled for the music to stop and turned to Léa. Duchesse d'Aramitz started at the sight of him, she took in several quick breaths, certain she was seeing the ghost of her husband. She took a deep breath and swallowed, looking more closely at the man. His face was darker than her husband's, the thin layer of dark hair that still covered Audric's face. A sob escaped her as she realized it was her son.

Audric took Léa's hands and knelt down. "Léa. Beauty," he smiled, "I ask you but once more, my life, my love is in your hands to accept or deny. Will you marry me?"

Léa responded with feeling, "Your life I give back to you as well as my own, that we might live it together. I give you, not just my presence or my friendship, but my heart, as well. Your love I accept with all my heart!"

Audric rose and embraced her as the room exploded in applause and cheers. Duchesse d'Aramitz discreetly made her exit so as not to be noticed. But someone did notice. Madame Villeneuve made her way through the exuberant crowd, past the well-wishers and back-slappers to Audric's side. She spoke into his ear, "Your mother is here, I believe she's gone in the direction of the gardens." He nodded his acknowledgment and whispered the news to Léa, then went in search of the woman who raised him.

He found her sitting on a bench in the formal gardens watching the little bluebird in her nest. Audric's heart stirred with compassion for her. As hard as she could be, he knew she'd poured her life into her son. It suddenly became clear that in that was the problem as well as the solution.

"Mother?" he said as he sat on the bench beside her.

She didn't turn. "It's funny how you spend your life tending something so helpless and dependant, then one day he flies off and there seems to be no need for you at all any longer."

Audric rested his head on her shoulder. "And yet, even the mother bird still has wings to fly."

She turned to face him and cradled his face in her hands. "I thought you were your father when I saw you just now. He would be so proud of you, Audric. Whether he would be equally pleased with me, I'm not so sure," her voice cracked.

“Can I tell you what I see when I look at you?” She returned his look with eyes at the same time hungry and uncertain. He went on, “I see someone who would move mountains just to make an impossible path open for her son. I see someone who exiled herself just so her son wouldn’t be alone. You’ve poured your life out for mine, Mother,” he took her hands in his, “and I *honor* that and I love you for it.”

Impenetrable Duchesse d'Aramitz began to cry. Her son wrapped his arms around her and held her.

“Against all forces to the contrary, you and Father raised me with love and dignity, without help from the world, and as you were told, without help from God. But that’s just it, Mother, you have tried to take God’s role in my life and that is a burden far too heavy for you to bear. As I now soar to new heights, fly with me from time to time, but perhaps now it is time for you to spread your own wings and have a life of your own. Travel, see the world. Go beyond the city, beyond Paris.”

“Travel by myself? That wouldn’t be very enjoyable.”

“I think I might be able to help you there,” Léa’s voice sounded beyond them. When they turned to her, she approached them. “My sister Juliette would very much enjoy such a trip, and I think you’d find her a suitably genteel companion, Duchesse.”

The Duchesse stood up and faced her, “My dear, it would seem I owe you an apology, and I fear even that would not be sufficient. I have behaved in a less than honorable way toward you and your family. Something that I’m coming to realize has caused a rift between my son and myself as he, rightly, begins a new life with his wife. I would be very sorry to not be a part of that, but I don’t know that you can forgive me now.”

Léa stood before her once enemy with the grace of a lily—elegant beauty that stands tall and strong. She regarded the now humbled lady before her and weighed her words and feelings. “Duchesse, you have treated me and my family with the greatest contempt and degradation, and there can be no taking back the deep hurt that you have caused not only us but your own son as well.” She paused and Audric rose to stand beside her. “But to punish you now would serve no one. The plans you made that caused harm, were used for good by God himself. So, if you will provide

no further imposition to our happiness, then I will not stand in the way of yours.” She held out her hand to the woman, “Shall we call a truce?”

Duchesse d'Aramitz took her hand, “You’ve been more than generous, Mademoiselle. I accept, what’s more, with my gratitude.”

“Now, if you both are ready, I believe we have a wedding to get to—two, actually,” Audric stepped in.

They both turned to look at him, lips parted in question.

“Now?” the Duchesse asked incredulously.

“Yes, well, in light of recent events, I thought it wise to proceed quickly this time.”

“Two? But how?” Léa asked.

“Come with me,” he gave them a secretive smile and held out his arms to escort them both.

They returned to the Great Hall where Audric signaled to Devereux, who then ushered in a man Audric explained was a sympathetic Huguenot. He had traveled there from Switzerland with Léa’s father. At their meeting three weeks prior, Audric had given Du Bois a letter that explained everything, which was to be given to what Huguenot leader he was able to find.

Audric turned to Léa, “After we talked about how a wedding could possibly take place, as will likely not be a surprise to you, I researched until I found what I hope you will find an acceptable solution. Do you happen to know the legend of St. Valentine?”

“I know of him, but not much about his story, no.”

“Well, in his day, the emperor of Rome decided he needed more soldiers for his army and so forbade Christians from marrying and thus have an excuse to avoid conscription. Valentinus, a priest, defied the order and secretly performed weddings. I had to ask myself, what makes marriage legitimate in God’s eyes, is it the church, is it the government? Valentinus thought it valid to defy the government, would it be equally right now to defy the church when it is wrapped up in the government?”

“And what was your conclusion?” Léa asked.

“My conclusion was that even if our marriage weren’t legal in terms of the government, and not performed by the legally accepted church, that it would be sufficient for it to be witnessed under God and a part of the church. But, it still troubled me, for your sake, that there was no

way to have a real church wedding, so I kept looking. I stumbled across something called ‘proxy marriage’ that is sometimes performed for those of high rank who live too far away from their intended to marry expediently.”

“Oh! Like King Henry IV!”

“Yes, very good, you know your history better than I do,” he smiled.

“Hm, I rather like knowing something you don’t, it makes me feel that much smarter.”

“I always knew there were many things that you excelled in that I didn’t, it’s why we’re so perfect for each other,” he winked and continued, “So, how would you feel if Édouard married you in my stead? Just as a placeholder, of course,” Audric was quick to explain. “By all legal and moral accounts it will be I who is marrying you.”

“But...I can’t imagine the priest in town has agreed to that, he wanted me to denounce you as a fiend not so very long ago.”

“Quite. Well, my household is known to the priest in the city, and as far as he is concerned I am Duc Rousseau of Château Rousseau and it is unlikely that he’ll ask questions. Édouard has already made the necessary arrangements, if you are willing that is. You can be there and back by nightfall if you leave soon after the ceremony here.”

Léa only had to think about it for a moment before she said, “If I know anything through this whole ordeal of the past months, it is that God has brought us together. I may not know the Holy Scriptures as well as you do, but I seem to remember a line that says, ‘What God has brought together, let not man separate.’ If this is the only way for us to be together, then so be it.”

“How well you have seen to every detail, Audric!” Duchesse d'Aramitz interjected.

The couple gave her a doubtful look. Audric ventured, “I believe Isaac and Rebekah may have stood on even less ceremony for their marriage. I wonder, Mother, whether that is what you had in mind when you planned our wedding.”

“I beg your pardon, what are you implying?”

Audric raised an eyebrow suspiciously, not thinking it possible that she hadn’t thought this matter over before now.

A look of horror came over her face, then dignified embarrassment. “I’ll admit I hadn’t thought my plan through completely, I had nothing in mind beyond the fact that she was of a sufficiently agreeable rank and disposition.”

Audric sighed and took her by the shoulders, then stated with emphasis, “My dear Mother, promise me you won’t implement any more such brilliant plans in the future.”

“Well, well,” she looked to the side and Audric tilted his head and waited. Turning back to him, she conceded, “Very well, I promise. Though this turned out just fine in the end, after all.”

Léa took in a deep breath and was quick to say, “And with that, I believe there was something we were about to get to.”

Huguenot ceremonies were simpler than traditional ones. When it was ended and the couple were invited to kiss, Audric whispered to Léa, “There will be time for that later, you have to leave now if you will be back before dark.”



After Léa and Édouard left for the city, Audric sat on the steps of the château waiting impatiently for his bride to return. Francine slipped out the door and sat quietly beside him.

“There have been many times when I’ve wanted to leave these gates and see what I was missing in the outside world,” Audric told her, “but there have only been a handful of those times that I felt I would crawl out of my skin because I couldn’t leave. One of those times was when Lisette was taken away, and again when Léa left the first time, and now, when I cannot even attend my own wedding. The official one anyway.”

Francine slipped her arm through his and rested her head on his shoulder.

He continued, “But...I will be officially married before the day is out, who would have guessed that?”

“I would have guessed that, Monsieur. You just lacked the opportunity.”

He smiled back at her. “You and Édouard were married in the city, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” she smiled. “Would you like me to describe the place and what will be said?”

“Yes, I would appreciate that, Francine.”

Francine and Audric had a long history together, it was true, she’d known him all his life, but they had a special bond because of the fact that she was especially aware of his inability to leave. She would always come and describe in detail the things everyone had experienced in the city. It was one of the main reasons he was drawn to her as a boy.

“The church in the city is a large one. The main sanctuary is about as big as the Great Hall, with rows and rows of pews to sit on, and a raised altar surrounded by statues of saints, ” she began her description. “But it will be in front of the elaborately carved oaken church doors that they will say the vows. The priest will speak of the purpose of marriage, ask if both are there under mutual consent, then they will say the vows. The priest will ask...”

Audric spoke the words instead, “Yes, I will love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, forsaking all others, keep only to her as long as we both shall live. To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until death do us part...”

Before Édouard spoke the words, he whispered to Léa, “I am but the messenger, from Audric’s heart, to my lips, to you.”

And he said the vows with such sincerity, she almost believed that it really was Audric there with her. When the carriage rumbled past the gates at dusk upon their return, it had barely stopped before her smiling husband opened the carriage door to greet her. He helped her down and they stood in rapture, gazing into each other’s eyes.

Édouard tried to discreetly slip the ring into Léa’s hand but she turned to him then to kiss his cheek and hug him.

“Thank you, Édouard,” she whispered.

He bowed in humble deference, then turned to his own wife and hugged her close as he led her away, his task now completed.

Léa turned back to Audric and placed the ring on his finger, then said, “Will you kiss the bride now, husband?”

He smiled with all the love and feeling that he'd held back for so many months and kissed her in beautiful release.

Chapter 28

The next morning, Audric watched his bride as she slept and a flooding sense of love and peace washed over him. A different kind of ache surrounded his heart, that of complete happiness, because he knew that while pain sometimes walks with love, sometimes love also just walks with a joy that fills to overflowing and runs over.

Léa stirred and stretched as her eyes fluttered open. She saw him watching her and closed her eyes again, “Mm, good morning, *mon amour*.” She smiled but kept her eyes shut. He traced a finger along her jawline and stopped at her chin. “Are you awake?” he whispered.

“Almost,” she stretched again.

He twirled the string of her nightdress on his finger and said, “I have a wedding present for you.”

She opened her eyes and turned on her side. “Is it another library?” she asked wistfully.

Audric laughed, “I knew that’s why you agreed to marry me! But, no, I’m afraid I only have one of those.”

“Ohh,” she moaned in feigned disappointment.

He turned to the table beside the bed and picked up something wrapped in leather and tied with a chord. “But it is something to add to it.”

She sat up and took it from him, running a hand over the leather and giving him a questioning look. Untying the chord and lifting the flap, she found a stack of papers filled with Audric's neat handwriting. “Your writing!” she exclaimed.

“This is a very particular story that I wrote just for you.”

“What story is that?”

“Ours.” He smiled.

“I’ll treasure it,” she hugged it to her then leaned toward him for a deep kiss. Léa glanced over the first page and ran a hand over it while Audric lay back down and brought an arm behind his head. After a minute, she set the story aside and lay down on her stomach beside him.

“You know, I rather like your hair,” she said as she ran her fingers through the hair visible at the top of his nightshirt and along his neck.

Audric laughed, “Do you now?”

“Yes,” she moved to his face, brushing her hand over it. “I wouldn’t trade it. Though I am happy to see your face better now.”

He smiled. “*Sais-tu à quel point je t’aime, ma chère?*”

Léa thought about his broken body lying on this bed not so very long ago and said, “I do know how much you love me, and now have but the rest of my life to prove my love to you.”

Audric reached up to touch her face and tears sprang to his eyes, “Don’t you know? You already have just by being here with me.”

She smiled and kissed him, then hopped out of bed. “Now I have a wedding gift for you, but you have to come with me.” She pulled at his arm until he sat up then started throwing clothes at him.

“What? Where are we going?” He laughed.

“You’ll see. Father should have delivered them by now.”

“Them?”



Léa led the way to the hedged garden door, when Audric stopped her and took a deep breath.

“Darling, I haven’t been in there since the day you left me.”

“Truly?” she answered, and a wave of sadness came over her. “I’m so sorry for the scars that day left you, both on your hands and your heart. I hope the garden will not be tainted to you now, please believe me when I say I will never leave you again.”

“I know,” he lowered his head. “We’ve had some delightful memories in there too, haven’t we?”

“Yes,” she smiled, “and we’ll make more, I promise.”

“Lead on then.” He gave her a tentative smile.

It didn’t take long before he saw what her surprise was in the garden. He excitedly ran the rest of the way to the cottage.

“Damask, Bourbon...Ayrshire!” he threw out the names of each variety of rose as he went to each of several rose bushes yet to be planted.

Léa walked up more slowly, pleased that he was excited by her gift. She'd asked her father to purchase the best rose bushes he could find to replace the ones torn out. Of course, she had no idea what the different varieties were and it wasn't her father's usual acquisition, so she was nervous they wouldn't be right.

"Léa, look, Alba!" He knelt before a bush that had a single white bloom on it and cupped it in his hands, breathing deeply of its scent. "Their fragrance is truly delightful, and they'll do well through our mountain winters."

"What does white mean, my love?"

"It has several meanings—purity, remembrance. But a single white rose has a very special meaning. It speaks an almost reverent message of hope and everlasting love."

Léa knelt down to breathe in the scent of the bloom as well.

Placing his arm around her shoulders and kissing her head, Audric asked, "Would you mind if I spoke to God for a moment?"

"No, of course not." She bowed her head and folded her hands.

Audric lifted his head and spoke in a hushed tone close to a whisper, "Beloved Father, Savior, Friend. I find myself at a loss for words...what words could convey how much you've given me?" He was silent for a long moment, then continued, "You've given us your everlasting love, and with a small measure of that my heart is so full it could burst in love for Léa. Thank you for the dangerous but powerful hope you've given me." He turned to Léa and added, "Amen."

Léa crossed herself and looked up. "This place is grander than the finest cathedral," she said, taking his hand. "And when we have children of our own, we'll bring them here and this shall be their church."

He squeezed her hand affectionately. "Even if they look like me?" He still wasn't sure how she felt about the possibility.

"They will be beautiful and loved either way, and we'll give them a life filled with that love. That's the best life that anyone can have."

"Agreed." He smiled and stood up, and Léa followed suit.

She turned back to the roses. "Now, do you want to plant these yourself or shall we commission Lambert to the task?"

Audric wrapped his arms around her waist from behind and said, "I'll let Lambert have the pleasure of that task. I think I'd rather handle

something less thorny for a while.” He nuzzled his face into her neck and kissed it. She laughed and brought a hand up to his head. “Are you happy, darling?” she asked.

“Very. And you?”

“Perfectly happy.”

Epilogue

While it may be too much to say that they lived happily ever after, it can be said that they lived in the joys and losses that life brings in the happy state of shared companionship.

Lisette and Jacques eventually married and were given the east wing in which to reside. Duchesse d'Aramitz did travel at her son's suggestion, finding a worthy companion in Juliette, for whom she couldn't help but try and find a suitable husband—much to her children's chagrin. Monsieur Du Bois continued on to be a reasonably successful traveling merchant, training François and Marie as they traveled with him.

As for Audric and Léa, they gave Duchesse d'Aramitz her wish, as grandchildren were soon forthcoming, much to everyone's delight. The first of which they, naturally, named Rose. You may be wondering whether she was more like her father or more like her mother, but that is a story for another day.

Though most of the village believed Audric to be dead, rumors continued to spread amongst the rest. On occasion an old grandmother would stop outside their château, shake her head and say, "Beauty and the Beast? Tsk, tsk, tsk, what a shame!" And if ever such things reached the couple's ears, they simply laughed and held each other tighter in the joy of their love.



Finis

Author's Note

Thank you for joining me on Audric and Léa's journey! It has been a pleasure to write their story. This story and the two that follow have poured out of me in a matter of a few months and I can't help but feel God's hand in it. I hope you have felt, as I have, the depth of God's affectionate and sacrificial love through the love that Audric has for Léa.

The idea of using a man with hypertrichosis (hair overgrowth) for this tale is not a new one. It has long been rumored that the man Petrus Gonsalvus, or other nobles with birth defects, may have been the inspiration for Madame de Villeneuve and Madame Beaumont's original tales (yes, I tried to give a nod to these two through the characters with those names!). An internet search will bring up pictures and other information on those with this condition for anyone interested.

The two books that follow will be best read in sequence as they build on this one. *Service and Slumber* is a Sleeping Beauty tale about Audric and Léa's daughter Rose and little Gabriel from this book. *A Gentle Pursuit* is a Cinderella and Ugly Duckling tale about Audric and Léa's second daughter, Giselle, and a Jewish doctor named Remy Zechariah Abraham. I hope you will join me on their journeys as well!